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THE INTERRUPTED KISS

RICHARD MARSH

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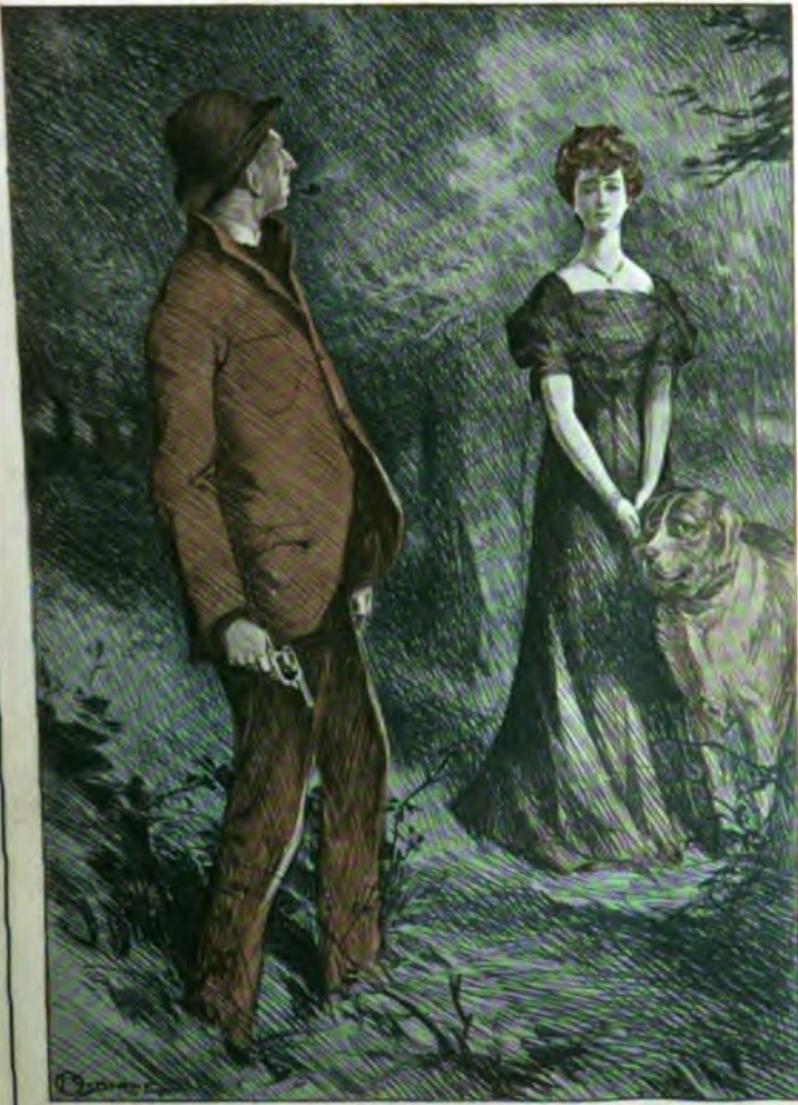
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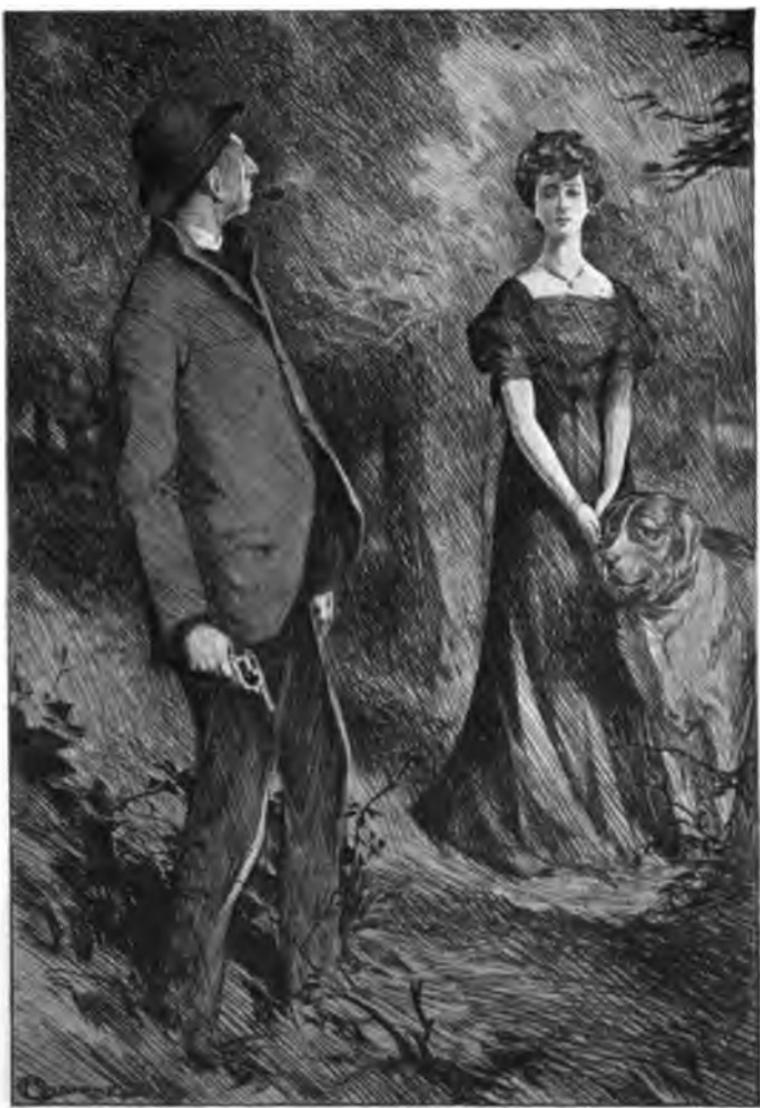
THE INTERRUPTED KISS



RICHARD MARSH

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THE INTERRUPTED KISS



"'What I want to know is, why are you here at all?'"
(page 168).

The Interrupted Kiss

By Richard Marsh

With a Frontispiece by Rex Osborne



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CHAPTER I

IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT

MRS. HARMAR sat up in bed, trying to make out what had woke her. Something had. A few seconds ago she had been fast asleep ; now she was wide awake ; something had caused her to pass from one state to another with surprising quickness. What was it ? The blind and curtains rustled at the open window ; she could hear the breezes whispering without. But in the room and the house all was still. Yet she was conscious of a curious conviction that she had been roused from slumber by some unusual sound ; one which, despite the silence, still seemed echoing in her ears. What could it have been ?

She listened for her husband's breathing. They occupied twin beds, separated only by a pedestal cupboard. She could always hear his breathing, when he slept, though ever so lightly. Now she could hear nothing. Was he awake and listening, as she was ? She wondered ; whispering his name in a tone which,

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while audible to him if awake, would not disturb him if he slept.

“Edwin!”

No reply; then he was not awake; but, if he slept, why could she not hear him breathing? A sudden panic possessed her.

“Edwin!”

She spoke louder, in a tone which she knew would reach him though he slept; for nothing was easier than to rouse him out of slumber. Yet no response. She waited for some moments, then, leaning from her bed towards his, she exclaimed again:

“Edwin!”

This time her voice sounded so portentously in the darkened room that she herself was startled; she had never known him sleep so that such a sound would not have effectually aroused him. But no answer came; there was not a movement in his bed. A suggestion that the first faint gleams of dawn were not far off seemed to be stealing through the sides of the blind, but as yet darkness still reigned. She tried to make out her husband's bed, but could not. Seized with a curious unreasoning fear of she knew not what; getting out of her own bed, with half a step she moved to his. It was empty; the sense of touch told her so much. That explained the silence. The bed-clothes were thrown right back, the sheet felt cool to her hand; apparently the bed had been unoccupied for some little time.

She felt for the candlestick which stood on the cupboard. It was gone, and the matches too; probably he

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had taken them both. The discovery of their absence seemed to increase her sense of discomfiture. What, in the darkness, all alone there, was she to do ? His absence was open to any one of half a dozen simple and natural explanations. Ordinarily it would not have disturbed her ; she would have awaited his return, and after a question or two there would have been an end. But then, to her disturbed imagination, everything wore an unwonted guise. Throughout the preceding day, ever since their arrival at Timberham, there had been an electrical quality in the air, of which she was conscious, though unable to explain. Something was going on which she did not understand. Edwin had come to bed long after she had ; his coming had disturbed her. Even though she had been heavy with sleep she had felt that there had been something unusual in his bearing as he was preparing himself for bed. In general the coolest and easiest-tempered of men, he had seemed both excited and angry. When she spoke to him he had answered curtly, almost rudely ; even in the midst of her sleepiness it had seemed to her dreadful that Edwin should be so uncivil, who was wont to be the most courteous of husbands. But so tired was she that, before she could expostulate, almost even, before she knew it, she was asleep again, and had continued to sleep, until suddenly she had been roused by she knew not what ; to find that Edwin was not in his bed after all.

Was it his leaving the room which had roused her ? It might have been ; yet she had a vague feeling that

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it had been something much more startling than that ; something which had come from without, not from within. Considering what time it must have been when Edwin came to bed, he could hardly have gone to sleep before he was up again. He had had no rest at all. What could have disturbed him ? Where could he have gone ? What could he be doing ?

Clare Harmar waited what seemed to her to be an inordinately long while without anything happening. There was not a sound ; not a sign of Edwin ; to her, all seemed even strangely still. To her excited imagination there was that in the very quality of the silence which suggested that something unusual was in the air. Groping her way to the door, opening it, she stood and listened. In the passage it was darker than in the bedroom ; nothing was to be either seen or heard. With her hand against the wall she went along it till she reached the main corridor beyond—Timberham was a rambling old house, all turns and twists. Having gained the corridor she paused, then moved to the left, and had only taken half a dozen little steps when a voice, speaking close to her, made her heart stand still.

“Who’s that ?”

She knew the voice, it was Elsie Grahame’s ; had it been some unknown monster’s it could hardly have frightened her more.

“Elsie ! How you frightened me !”

“Clare ! Is that you ? When I heard you coming I thought I should have died ! My dear ! my dear !”

Although they were now so close that they could

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touch each other, and were, indeed, promptly folded in each other's arms, in the pitch darkness of the narrow winding passage they still remained invisible. They spoke in whispers.

"Clare, did you hear that dreadful noise ? "

"Something disturbed me, I wondered what it was."

"When I woke there was such a din that I thought the house was tumbling down about my ears. When I went to my room door to find out what was the matter, the only thing I could hear was Rupert's voice, shouting as if he had gone mad."

"Rupert ? "

"Clare, something dreadful has been going on downstairs. I—I'm afraid to think what."

Mrs. Harmar, becoming conscious that the girl whom she held in her arms, was only in her night attire, without even a dressing-gown, realised, with something of a shock, that she herself was in the same condition. That Elsie was in a state of curious agitation was plain ; she could feel her, though the night was warm, trembling as with cold. It was probably only the force of her own emotion which kept her from inquiring how the other came to be wandering about alone. Mrs. Harmar feared that she might ask at any moment. What answer could she give ? The girl's words and manner affected her more than she would have cared to admit. Evidently her presentiment had been justified ; the dead of the night had seen strange happenings. How stupid she had been to leave her room in that wild-goose fashion ! Suppose Elsie asked what had become of her husband,

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should she tell her that she had come in search of him, after what she had hinted of terrible doings below ? Hardly ; that might be to entangle Edwin in she knew not what. Her desire was to get back to her room as fast as she could, before Edwin got there ; before anyone, except Elsie, knew that she had left it. She put her desire into instant execution.

" Hush, Elsie ! there's someone coming ! Get back to your room ; I'm going to mine ; quick ! "

The words were but a feint. So far as she knew, no one was coming, there was not a sound to be heard. All she wanted was an excuse to retreat. Loosing Elsie, indifferent whether she went or stayed, flying around her own corner as fast as the darkness would let her, she regained her room, to find that her husband had already returned. The lighted candle was on the mantel. He was by the bedside in his pyjamas, some papers in his right hand.

" How did you get back ? " she asked.

He replied to her question with another.

" Where have you been ? "

" Edwin ! I've been to look for you. How you've frightened me. When I woke, I found you weren't in your bed, I wondered where you'd gone. When I waited, and you didn't come, I thought that something must have happened ; I went to try to find you. How did you get back without my seeing you ? "

" You've been to look for me ? How far have you been ? "

She was troubled by the singularity of his tone and

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manner. He spoke so abruptly, so harshly, so threateningly. There was such a strange look upon his face ; of anger, and she knew not what beside ; his jaw was set so rigidly, so sternly ; there was such a curious pallor about his cheeks, as if he were white with rage ; such a glare was in his eyes, in which, until then, when they looked at her, they had scarcely ever known anything but a smile. This was not the sunny, light-hearted, careless, easy-going Edwin Harmar she had married ; he was transformed. She stared at him, her hand held to her side ; she felt as if a cold finger had touched her heart.

"I've only been to the corner. I can't make out how you got back here without my seeing you, especially if you were carrying a light."

"I wasn't. I only lit up when I found that you weren't in the room."

"Edwin, tell me ! what's happened ? What have you been doing ? I know it's silly, but you don't know how—how anxious I have been."

She spoke with an intensity of which she was not conscious. It affected him oddly ; he turned his back on her, as if he were aware that it was only by not seeing her face that he could resist her appeal.

"Don't ask me any questions now. In the morning I'll tell you all there is to tell. Get into bed."

He spoke hoarsely, as if it were with difficulty that he spoke at all. Stretching out one of the papers he was holding towards the candle it burst into flame. She noticed that in shape it seemed a narrow oblong, and

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that its colour was blue. He held it in his fingers while it was consumed.

“What is that you’re burning ?”

“Don’t you see that it’s a paper ? Please do as I tell you—get into bed, and go to sleep.”

“Aren’t you going to bed ?”

“I am when I have burnt these papers.”

She would have liked to ask a dozen questions, but she did not dare. She had never conceived of it as possible that she could be afraid of her husband ; but she was then. Consciously or not, she had hitherto regarded him as a more or less irresponsible being who was to be steered through life by her. This new, curt, grim man scared her. She was awed by the discovery that behind the man she knew was another of whose existence she had not dreamed. Attempting no remonstrance, she got into bed, as he had bade her. She lay and watched him burning the oblong-shaped blue papers one after the other. She counted them ; there were seven. It was noticeable how he held each between his finger and thumb till it was utterly consumed. When they were all burned he blew out the candle and got into bed without a word. She waited for him to speak ; when he still said nothing, “Good-night,” she murmured.

“Good-night.”

His tone was gruff, as if he spoke against his will. She lay still, feeling as if that cold finger were being pressed closer to her heart. When she could bear it no longer she whispered :

“Edwin, mayn’t I come into your bed ?”

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"I'd rather you didn't, you're better where you are.
Go to sleep."

"I never shall go to sleep if I stay here. Please—
please may I come?"

She spoke almost with a sob in her voice. There
was a momentary pause before he answered.

"Come."

Nothing could have savoured less of enthusiasm than
the sanction so brusquely given. Yet she scrambled out
of her bed into his as eagerly as if he had offered her
the warmest of welcomes. She snuggled into his arms
almost as it seemed against his will, but when she had
once got there he held her tight. She kissed him, and
whispered,

"Sweetheart!"

He said nothing, but his hold tightened. Presently
in his arms she was fast asleep, sleeping as quietly as
sleeps a child. But he did not close his eyes.

CHAPTER II

THE NEWS WHICH THE MORNING BROUGHT

THE sun was pouring in through the sides of the blind when there came a sharp rapping at the bedroom door. On the instant Harmar, wide awake, inquired :

“Who’s there ?”

A masculine voice replied :

“If you please, Mr. Harmar, can I speak to you at once ?”

Slipping from beneath the sheets Harmar crossed towards the door. His moving disturbed his wife, who woke with a little startled exclamation.

“Edwin!—what’s the matter? Where are you going? Who’s at the door?”

Vouchsafing no reply, her husband, passing through the door, drew it to behind him. Not yet sufficiently awake to be clearly conscious of what was taking place, she lay still, with her head on the pillow. Presently the door reopened, to admit her husband’s head.

“I’m going downstairs with Tyrrell.”

Before she could speak the door was shut again, and he was gone. She sat up in bed, effectually roused by his words and action. Gone downstairs

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with Tyrrell ? Why had he done that ? In such haste that he could not stay to put a dressing gown over his pyjamas ? Tyrrell was her uncle's manservant, who, under his master, ruled the household with a rod of iron. What could he want with Edwin, that he should so unceremoniously take him away ? In the morning brightness it was not easy to recall the events of the night, in all their seeming portentous significance ; but she remembered. Had Tyrrell's abrupt bearing away of her husband anything to do with what had occurred in the night ? she wondered, conscious of a little fluttering in her bosom.

Suddenly there was a tapping at the panel of the door, quite different from Tyrrell's. That was authoritative, ominous, commanding attention ; this was furtive, timid, as if desirous of attracting as little attention as needs be. Yet there was about it a quality which affected her more than the other had done her husband.

“Who is it ?”

A voice, which seemed as anxious as the tapping to evade notice, inquired :

“May I come in ?”

“Elsie ! Is it you ? Of course ! Edwin's gone downstairs.”

The door opened to admit her cousin, Elsie Grahame.

“Why—my goodness !—are you already dressed ?”

“I've been dressed some little while.”

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"Whatever is the time?"

"It's still early. Haven't you—haven't you heard?"

"Heard what?" Mrs. Harmar glanced at her husband's watch, which was on the pedestal cupboard at her side. "Why, it's not yet six o'clock! What on earth has got you out of bed—dressed!—at this hour of the morning? Is it—Rupert?"

About the speaker's lips were the beginnings of a smile; as she noticed the expression which was on the girl's face they vanished.

"Elsie, what is the matter? Why did you ask me if I'd heard? Tyrrell's just dragged Edwin off downstairs, but I've not the faintest notion why."

Elsie was standing at the foot of the bed, with both hands clasping the brass rail, as if they found it necessary to clasp something. Mrs. Harmar saw how white she was, what an odd look was in her eyes; how her lips seemed to twitch when she spoke—which she did in a whisper which was only just audible to her cousin sitting up at the other end of the bed.

"Uncle John is dead."

"Dead! Uncle John! Elsie!"

"He—he's been killed."

"Killed? What do you mean?"

"He—he's been murdered in the night."

There was silence. The young women looked at each other; what they saw in each other's eyes they alone knew; it seemed to be something which caused

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their hearts to stand still. Presently Elsie, moving from the foot of the bed, turning to the window, began, as if mechanically, unwittingly, to draw up the blind.

"What are you doing?" asked Mrs. Harmar.

"I beg your pardon; I—I was forgetting."

"It doesn't matter, go on now; let's have all the sunshine that we can."

Elsie drew the blind up to the top; the morning sun filled the room with a glow of golden light. While the girl stood looking out of the window, seeing but she knew what, Mrs. Harmar asked, speaking as if she touched on a forbidden topic:

"Are you sure?"

"About—uncle?"

"Yes."

"Quite. I—I've seen him."

There was something in the way in which this was said which caused the other to shiver. Elsie turned towards the bed; words burst suddenly from her lips.

"Clare, I've come to ask you not to tell anyone that we saw each other in the middle of the night."

"We didn't. I certainly did not see you."

"You know what I mean. Please forget anything you may have heard me say."

"I have forgotten."

"Thank you. Oh, Clare!"

The girl put her hands up to her face with a

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sound which was very like a sob. Mrs. Harmar remonstrated.

"Don't! It may be all a mistake."

Lowering her hands, the girl regarded her cousin with a look in her eyes which was more eloquent than many words could have been. Mrs. Harmar shut her eyes, as if she preferred not to see what was in the other's. As if the purpose of her coming was fulfilled, Elsie moved towards the door, pausing as she reached it.

"If anyone asks if you were disturbed in the night you are to say that you were not—you understand?"

"I understand."

"Promise that you will say that nothing disturbed you."

"I promise."

The girl went out. Mrs. Harmar continued sitting up in bed, something on her face which had not been there when the girl had entered. Leaning over the side of the bed she saw in the grate the ashes of the papers which her husband had burned in the candle. Slipping on to the floor, she picked them out, scrap by scrap, and crushed them in her hands, till nothing remained but the black stain upon her skin. She had had her bath, and had nearly completed her toilet when her husband reappeared. If at his entrance she started, it was only for a moment; she went on dressing with an appearance of outward calm. In general he would have burst boisterously

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into the room, whistling or singing, and would have addressed her laughingly, if he had not taken her into his arms and kissed her ; for, although they had been married more than two years, until yesterday they had been still in that stage in which some husbands and wives are fonder than lovers. Now he came in silently, and being in said nothing. His wife, without turning, could see, in the looking-glass, that he stood staring about him absent-mindedly, as if uncertain what to do ; something in his attitude seemed to pain her almost beyond bearing. She asked, speaking with an effort which would have been perceptible to anyone but him :

“What did Tyrrell want you for ?”

Her question seemed to bring him back to earth with a bump.

“Tyrrell ? Oh ?—something—something dreadful has happened to your uncle.”

“What ?”

“Clare—he’s dead.”

“Dead !”

Try as she might she could not bring into her tone the ring of horror and surprise which she felt that the occasion demanded. Its absence went unnoticed by him. All his faculties seemed to be engaged in the effort to tell her something he found it very difficult to put into words. His readiness or tongue was a proverb. Nothing could have shown more clearly the odd condition he was in than his stammering inability to find the words he wanted.

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"It looks—it looks—as if—he had been murdered." Again she was vaguely conscious that the announcement ought to have shocked her into speechless amazement, but she was so struck by a peculiarity which she thought she noted in his tone that she forgot all else.

"What do you mean by 'it looks'?"

"Clare, God knows! God knows!"

This time his passionate reference to the Deity did shock her. As he moved towards her she, as if without knowing it, drew back a little. He threw out his arms with a gesture which italicised his words.

"I don't understand! I don't understand!"

She eyed him as if something in his words or manner had sent her doubts travelling in a new direction.

"What don't you understand?"

Apparently he had all at once become conscious that in her bearing there was something singular; he observed her as if he were endeavouring to ascertain exactly what it was. Suddenly he drew himself up straighter; his tone changed, it became peremptory, hard.

"I can only tell you that John Culver's dead. As, although he was your uncle, no love was lost between us, I can scarcely pretend to be very sorry. How he came to his death cannot be said with certainty till a doctor has seen him. Banyard has been sent for, and by the time he's here I ought to be dressed."

He went to the bath-room, his towels over his arm. His wife, left alone, surveying her pretty face in the mirror, said to herself one or two curious things :

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"Is this the end?—or is it only the beginning? I wonder if I am sorry that Uncle John is dead?"

She could see for herself how suddenly she changed countenance as she replied to her own question.

"I suppose it depends a good deal on how he died!"

CHAPTER III

THE EMPTY ROOM

ELSIE GRAHAME went from Mrs. Harmar's room straight into the garden, hatless, just as she was. She felt that she would suffocate if she stayed in the house, that she must breathe the clean, fresh air; but she could not rid herself of that suffocating feeling even when she was out of doors, though it was the sort of morning in which her soul had been wont to delight. Nothing surprises youth so much as the rapidity with which the aspect of the world can be changed. It seemed incredible that this could be the world in which she had gone to sleep last night, incredible. That was a place in which it had been good to be alive, and in which there was nothing but happiness; this was the place unspeakable, in which there was only blackness; hiding from her the fact that the sun was shining. She knew not where to go to escape her misery. She knew, indeed, that she never could escape it, but, if only for an instant, she could forget it. She went quickly across the grass, almost scampering in her eagerness to reach the wood, where, peradventure, oblivion might be found. She had reached the gate

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which opened into the copse when a sound came towards her through the air.

“Elsie!”

Someone called her name; a voice which she knew well. As she heard it she reeled, catching at the top of the gate with both her hands, as if, without its support she would have fallen. Although she might not have admitted it even to herself, it was to escape from the owner of that voice, for at least a little while, that she had been hurrying towards the wood. Now that the sound of it came to her it was as though her limbs had been turned into lead, and her feet fastened to the ground; she could not move. Had hers been the gifts of the fairies she would, there and then, have become invisible, or transported herself, in the twinkling of an eye, to the other side of the world. Being without them, since her limbs refused to perform for her their proper offices, she could but cling to the gate, and await, helplessly, his coming; for he was coming, moving towards her across the grass more rapidly even than she had done.

“Whither away, child, at ten miles an hour? Are you for the woods, so early in the morning? It’s an excellent idea, I’ll come with you. But, first, if my lady pleases.”

He made as if, as a matter of course, he would take her in his arms. She shrank closer to the gate, holding out her arm to ward him off.

“No!—don’t touch me!—don’t!”

He stared at her as if surprised.

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"But, Elsie, I only want to finish the kiss I began last night."

"Last night my uncle was not dead."

"That is true ; but last night you promised you'd be my wife, and, despite the dear gentleman's departure for a better world, that fact remains this morning."

"It doesn't."

She stood with her back close up to the gate, as if its near neighbourhood gave her courage. He was a tall, dark man, with a hairless face, which looked as if it never needed shaving ; a clever face, with a strong mouth and chin ; the face of a man who, if he was set on a thing, would not stick at a trifle to get it. A critical spectator might have felt that they would make a well-matched pair. Like him, she was also tall ; with a clear, colourless skin which goes with perfect health ; a great mass of hair whose hue suggested the young hazel nut which has just been detached from its green envelope ; and grey eyes, which had a trick of looking half a dozen different things in half a dozen consecutive seconds. To Rupert Earle it seemed that at that moment they looked a dozen different things at once. There was a twinkle in his own dark orbs as he endeavoured to resolve precisely what they were.

"The fact that last night you promised you would be my wife does not remain a fact this morning ? Well, well ! "

About the corners of his lips there was the hint of a smile, as if there was that in this young lady's attitude

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which amused him. His seeming enjoyment of the situation was evidently not shared by her.

“Do you think that I don’t know?”

The words came from her as if she would have thrown them at him.

“Know what?”

“Oh-h-h!”

The exclamation was apparently involuntary, convulsive. As she had done in Mrs. Harmar’s bedroom, she put her hand up to her face as if to veil her eyes.

“Elsie, what’s wrong? Tell me.”

“As if you didn’t know.”

“You credit me with a knowledge which I lack. Come, make a clean breast of it to your future husband.”

“My future husband! You! My God!”

Again covering her face with her hands she stood shuddering as with palsy. He waited till the paroxysm seemed to have spent itself.

“Some bee’s got into your bonnet; I wonder what it is. Last night I told you, what I’ve no doubt you knew already, that I cared for you more than I thought I had it in me to care for any woman; and you told me, what seemed too good to be true, that you cared for me a little.”

“Don’t speak of it! I forbid you to speak of it!”

“But—isn’t it unreasonable? Now when, this morning, I come to you as my plighted wife, you—really!—seem to regard me as if I were a leper.

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That is not the proper way to treat your future husband."

"Mr. Earle——"

"Mr. Earle!"

"Rupert Earle, if you prefer that I should address you by your Christian name, for the last time. I've been wondering, since an early hour this morning, if this would be the attitude you'd take up; I wondered if you'd have sufficient courage. There is only one condition on which I might become your wife."

"It's conceded; so long as you're my wife, what matters?"

"Wait, until you've heard. I believe I have read somewhere that a wife cannot give evidence against her husband on a capital charge. If my being kept out of the witness-box were the only thing which could save you from the gallows, then, for your neck's sake, I might become your wife; but in that case only."

As she spoke she looked him straight in the face, and he looked her. But while her grey eyes seemed to blaze, the twinkle in his dark ones had grown more pronounced. His hands in his trousers pockets, his head thrust a little forward, his lips pressed close together, there was in every line of him the suggestion that dogged does it.

"Upon my honour!—that's a nice thing to say to a man!—last night's lover!"

"It's the truth, and all I have to say to you—or ever shall have."

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"You're—shall I put it?—suggesting that I gave John Culver his quietus. Well, if I did? Never a man better deserved to have his neck well twisted; you know it, though you're his niece. All the world knows it. Do you think I'd let a trifle like that stand between you and me? Not much! That kiss was unfinished last evening. I've had it in my mind all through the night that I'd finish it this morning, and, as sure as we are still alive——"

"Clare!"

Her sudden call diverted his attention; he looked round; in that instant she had passed him and was away flying across the grass at the top of her speed, calling as she went:

"Clare! Clare!"

Mrs. Harmar had just come out of the house. When she heard her cousin's voice, and saw her running, she advanced to meet her. When they reached each other the girl was trembling so that she could scarcely stand.

"Elsie! What is the matter with you? From whom have you been running away?"

"I've been running away from Rupert."

"Running away from Rupert! But—I thought—it was generally rather the other way about."

"Clare!—don't say that!—don't say it! Don't talk like that—ever again! If I could I'd hide myself from him at the bottom of the sea. I'd go anywhere, do anything, if I could make sure that he would never come near me again."

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Mrs. Harmar said nothing. She looked at the excited girl with her pretty face all puckered up as if bewildered. When Rupert Earle, quitting his solitude by the gate, came towards them across the lawn, Elsie would have continued her retreat, but Mrs. Harmar stayed her, gripping her, with unexpected strength, by the arm.

"Don't be silly!—don't make a scene!—keep still. Don't you understand that, if you don't want bad to become worse, you must try to behave as if nothing had happened—at least for the present?"

The words were spoken beneath her breath; as if, though there was no one near them, she wished to run no risk of being overheard. They seemed to have their effect upon the girl, who replied in the same tone.

"I'll keep still; I won't make a scene, only, please let go of my arm, you hurt."

Mrs. Harmar loosed her. The two women waited side by side for the man's approach—Elsie white and tremulous, Clare with an appearance of greater ease, the ghost of a smile upon her face. Earle broke into greeting while he was still at a distance.

"Good morning, Mrs. Harmar. Isn't there a play called 'The Adventures of a Night'? It's been an adventurous night at Timberham; alarums and excursions, robbers and thieves, and I don't know what. I've to sympathise with you on the loss of your uncle."

"Thank you, Mr. Earle."

"Poor, dear, good old man! There was no love lost between us, and I never pretended that there was."

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Was there anyone who loved him ? I'll swear there was no one he ever loved. Love and John Culver ! The Latin tag bids us speak no ill of the dead, but at such a moment one must say something. Only a week or two ago I warned him that, if he wasn't careful, he'd never die in his bed ; and he hasn't. Hullo, Harmar !"

Edwin Harmar had come through an open French window. Earle hailed him, shouting an inquiry.

"Do you remember my telling old Culver that if he didn't mind his P's and Q's he'd come to a bad end ?"

Harmar came rapidly towards them—angrily.

"Earle, don't be a fool—shouting out such things !—as if the whole world couldn't hear you !"

"The whole world can hear for all I care."

"But I care, and so do you, if you're not an idiot. I've been wondering how I can get my wife out of the house ; and Elsie. They oughtn't to stop a moment longer than can be helped."

"Do you think the police will let them go ?"

"What the deuce do you mean ?"

"My dear man, the whole house is suspect. Probably the attitude of the police will be that the old gentleman's been done to death by some member of his own household. They may suspect anyone—you!—or me! Here's Tyrrell ; what does he want ? Possibly he's coming to tell us that there's already a warrant out for our arrest."

Tyrrell was a tall, thin man, with a slight stoop. His hair was just turning grey. He was a person of

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few words, and had the reputation of being bad tempered. How, if that was the case, he had managed to continue in John Culver's service for more than thirty years was a mystery. A more trying master for a bad-tempered servant it would have been difficult to find. At the present moment he seemed oddly disconcerted. He was stroking his shaven chin with nervous fingers ; his eyes had a trick of looking at anyone but the person whom he addressed.

“Excuse me, but—can either of you gentlemen tell me what has become of Mr. Palgrave ?”

They stared at him, his tone and manner were so strange. It was Mr. Harmar who spoke.

“Mr. Palgrave ? Isn't he in his bedroom ?”

“No, sir, that's exactly what he isn't ; it doesn't look as if he had been either.”

A keen observer might have noticed that Earle and Harmar exchanged glances ; as it were, involuntary glances. This time it was Earle who spoke, sharply, as if the man's statement had annoyed him.

“Rubbish ! I saw him go into his room with my own eyes. I said ‘good-night’ to him at his bedroom door.”

“Then, in that case, he's not in it now.”

“Why should he be ? Can't he have gone out for an early walk ? Where's the mystery ? Keep a tight hold of yourself, Tyrrell, or you'll be seeing something where there's nothing to be seen ; I've met cases like yours before.”

“Well, Mr. Earle, it's like this. The maid went

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up to call Mr. Palgrave, and when he didn't answer, she looked in, thinking he might be asleep. But he wasn't in his room at all, and, as the bed hasn't been slept in, it doesn't look as if he had been."

"How do you know the bed hasn't been slept in?"

"The girl fetched me to look. There was everything exactly as she had left it last night—the bed turned down, his pyjamas laid out, nothing touched. If, as you say, sir, he did go into his room, he never went to bed, that's certain sure. And where is he now?"

CHAPTER IV

INSPECTOR FELKIN

THERE could be no doubt as to how John Culver had come to his death, even had Dr. Banyard's pronouncement on the subject been less assured. He had been struck on the head with the corner of a small iron cash box ; the blow had killed him. There was the box on the floor, within a foot of where he lay, to prove it, with his blood on one of the corners. Great force had been used ; more than was necessary. He was an old man, in bad health. As Dr. Banyard put it, the action of his heart was so uncertain that almost anything might have produced death ; the mere shock of discovering that he was being robbed would probably have been sufficient, and there would have been no murder.

He had been found in the room which was called the library, though practically the only books which it contained were some treatises on the law of debt, on whose dicta he had been too wise a man to lean. On the shelves, instead of books, were iron boxes. Three of these lay open on the floor. What had been taken from them it was not easy to determine ; probably something, though more had been left behind. One

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of the boxes was nearly filled with jewellery, and valuable bric-à-brac, done up neatly in parcels, with names outside. Queerly enough, from the policeman's point of view, the contents seemed to have been left intact. A second had been turned upside down, with the apparent intention of facilitating the inspection of the papers with which it had been filled. But it seemed that it was from the third that most had been taken. The inference was that the thief was looking for some especial booty ; on opening the third box he had seen it staring him in the face, and was about to make off with it when Culver, coming in, had caught him in the act. Having gone so far he did not hesitate to go a little farther, and, having disposed of the intruder, made off with his spoils.

That, at least, was the conclusion to which the police came. The village constable, George Wilkins, was the first representative of authority to come upon the scene. Before long he was joined by his official superior, Inspector Felkin, from the local town of Braxham. Country police are not, as a rule, the wisest of men, but they are sometimes apt to make up in dogmatism for what they lack in wisdom. Inspector Felkin had not been in the house many minutes before he knew about everything. He could have reproduced the crime, almost to the smallest detail. He had the exact hour at which it had taken place ; the motive ; even the criminal ; all quite pat.

In Mr. Culver's bedroom his watch had fallen from a small table which stood by his bedside, and had stopped

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at eighteen minutes past two. Tyrrell testified that it was his master's invariable custom to put his watch upon that table before he got into bed. Inspector Felkin inferred that the old gentleman, disturbed by a noise in the night, had gone down to see what had caused it ; consciously or not, touching the table, he had knocked off the watch, and the fall had stopped it. The inspector decided that the murder had taken place within a very short time of the watch having been stopped. He was supported by the doctor's admission that it was quite possible that John Culver had been dead since twenty minutes past two. In that way he arrived at the exact time.

The library was a good-sized room. It had three windows, which ran nearly from the floor to the ceiling. Like all the windows in the house, they opened outwardly. One of them had been found open. On the flower-bed without were the footprints of someone who had alighted heavily ; they had made deep incisions in the soil, as if someone had sprung through the window. They could be traced right across the lawn, which, owing to recent rain, was soft and susceptible to the least impression ; and even across a flower-bed beyond, as if their owner, in his haste, had gone, blundering in the darkness, heedlessly over it. In Walter Palgrave's deserted bedroom were found a pair of boots which fitted these footprints to a nicety. Inspector Felkin inferred that, caught by John Culver in the act of committing robbery, the thief had passed without hesitation from the lesser crime to the greater, and then

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had fled through the night to escape the consequences of what he had done. So he arrived at the criminal.

Whatever had prompted Walter Palgrave's departure from Timberham, it did seem that he had started unexpectedly and in haste. There was the state of his room to show it. He might have taken somebody else's property with him, but his own personal belongings he had left behind. Apparently he had gone away, according to Inspector Felkin, between two and three o'clock in the morning, in a dinner jacket suit, without an overcoat, and hatless. So far as was ascertainable, his other garments were still in his room. He had brought a suit case with him from town ; there was the case, there were the clothes he had been wearing on his arrival ; the odds and ends the maid remembered to have seen unpacked. According to her, she had done the room when he went down to dinner, and she was sure it was precisely as she had left it. Mr. Earle might have seen him go into his room ; he had touched nothing in it if he had—that she was prepared to swear.

On the dressing-table, among other papers, was a letter from a firm of money-lenders in town ; it was characteristic of Palgrave that he should have left a communication of such a delicate nature, and of such importance, where, practically, anyone could see it. It was a very brusquely worded intimation to the effect that they would stand no more nonsense, and that if, before a certain specified date, he did not come to a satisfactory arrangement, they would, without further notice, take steps which he would find most unpleasant.

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The letter was signed "Tuckerings," the name by which the firm was known—too well known; there were no more notorious usurers in England. The accident that such a letter should have been found in that house was rendered more remarkable by the fact that it was commonly understood that Palgrave's host, John Culver, was Tuckerings. In how many concerns of the kind he had a controlling hand, probably no one knew but the old gentleman himself, but there were sufficient reasons for associating him with the most unsavoury of them all. Palgrave had received no invitation; he had sent a telegram to say that he was coming. Mr. Culver had opened and read the telegram, while Tyrrell was waiting to learn if there was any answer. He had read it twice; then had laughed, ungenially—old Culver's "cheery" laugh, as it was satirically called, had been famous for more than one generation.

"Mr. Walter Palgrave telegraphs to inform me that he proposes to favour me with his company in my house to-night. See that a room is prepared for him. As Mr. Earle and Mr. Harmar will be here, we shall be a merry party."

Those, Tyrrell reported, were the words he had uttered when he had read the telegram a second time. When he spoke of "a merry party" he laughed again. What he meant by the allusion Tyrrell did not know.

Inspector Felkin inferred that Palgrave owed Tuckerings money; that he had come down to ask John Culver to give him time, or to prefer some similar request;

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that Culver had refused ; that, grown desperate in consequence, Palgrave formed some wild scheme to get hold of the proofs of his indebtedness, which he knew that his host had in his possession ; that Culver caught him in the act of putting his scheme into execution—and there was the motive.

Intentionally or not, some members of the household lent colour to the inspector's inferences, making it very clear to himself that he was on the right track. He held a sort of informal court of inquiry, at which everybody was asked questions. It came out that there had been what was, in all probability, a stormy scene between Palgrave and his host. Everyone agreed that they had not seemed on good terms at dinner, and were with difficulty prevented from saying things to each other which were not of a complimentary kind. Something else came out ; that, after dinner, a good deal had been drunk. It was not easy for the inspector to get all the information he required. That Mrs. Harmar and Miss Grahame, Mr. Harmar and Rupert Earle, and even Tyrrell, were unwilling witnesses, was obvious enough. The inspector was good enough to inform them that, while he respected their wish to keep silent on all subjects on which silence should be kept, it would be better for all parties concerned that they should tell everything which, sooner or later, would have to be told, possibly under more disagreeable conditions than the present. His little exordium had not, however, the effect of inducing volubility. What he did get from them was not got easily ; he did not attempt to conceal

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from them that, in his opinion, they were keeping from him as much as they possibly could.

It seemed that, on the preceding evening, after dinner, Mr. Culver had retired alone to the library ; Miss Grahame went with Mr. Earle for a stroll, while Mrs. Harmar had gone with her husband and Walter Palgrave to the billiard room. Apparently the only person who saw John Culver afterwards was Tyrrell, who, according to custom, went to him at ten o'clock, to inquire if anything more was wanted. Mr. Culver, who did not seem to be in the best of tempers, informing him that there was not, told him to go to bed at once, expressly forbidding him to wait up for the others. Tyrrell admitted that he did not go to bed at once. Shortly afterwards he heard the old gentleman go upstairs and bang his bedroom door. He himself went about eleven. Miss Grahame and Mr. Earle had come in long before then, and the two ladies had retired. Tyrrell looked in at the billiard room before he went. The three gentlemen were playing cards. Mr. Palgrave asked him if there were any more whisky in the house. A decanter nearly full of whisky, and another about half full of brandy, had been taken into the billiard room shortly after dinner. The whisky decanter was empty. Tyrrell refilled it. When he went into the billiard room in the morning he saw that both decanters were empty. Apparently the three gentlemen between them had disposed of practically two bottles of whisky and half a pint of brandy. **Messrs. Earle and Harmar**

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declared that when they went to bed, about two, the whisky decanter was quite half full, and the brandy had not been touched. How both decanters came to be found empty they did not understand. They admitted that, though not intoxicated, Mr. Palgrave had had enough to drink.

"I'm afraid," observed the inspector, when he had made an end of asking questions, "that if Mr. Palgrave does not put in an appearance very soon, and explain several things which badly need explaining, he'll find himself in an uncomfortable position, very uncomfortable indeed. I can quite understand the wish of his friends to screen him, but, from the evidence before me, it strikes me that we shan't have to look very far for the guilty party."

When Messrs. Earle and Harmar were alone they looked at each other oddly. Rupert Earle laughed out aloud; Edwin Harmar indulged in what might be described as a wry smile.

"Where," he demanded, "can you find a finer natural idiot than a country policeman?"

Earle laughed again.

"Ye whales and little fishes! What beats me is, where do they get 'em? Do they stick in an advertisement, 'Wanted, a fool, to represent the strong arm of the law?' If that's the method, it proves that advertising brings what's wanted."

Mrs. Harmar said to Miss Grahame, as they were crossing the hall:

"I want to speak to you; come to my bedroom."

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When they were in the bedroom she shut the door. It was some seconds before she showed any inclination to enter on the subject to which she had alluded. Miss Grahame was standing by the open window, with her face rigid and set. Mrs. Harmar pretended to put some feminine trifles into their proper places. She was arranging some ribbons when she spoke.

"Elsie, do you believe that Walter Palgrave did it?"

It seemed as if her tone was almost studiously careless, in striking contrast to the other's passionate intensity.

"Clare! Do I believe! I wish I could!"

"That rather suggests a kindly thought for Walter."

"You know what I mean."

"Elsie, you and I must understand each other. It seems that there's going to be a coroner's inquest; and all sorts of horrid things. You and I may be wanted to give evidence."

"Clare!"

"Edwin did think of taking both of us far, far away, but it seems that that would never do. They might think all sorts of dreadful things of us. Of course, if they want me in the witness-box—though I don't see what's the use, because I know absolutely nothing."

"Nor I."

"Then that's understood; under all circumstances, we know nothing."

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“Nothing.”

The girl echoed the word with her hands tightly clenched and her face turned away. Presently she spoke again; Mrs. Harmar was still busy with her ribbons.

“Suppose they find him?”

“In that case we may have to come to a fresh understanding.”

“Do you think—they’d do anything to him?”

“I have had no actual experience of the working of the law, as you know, but I rather fancy that there’s no telling what the law will do. If Inspector Felkin represents it, it looks as if the law would hang him.”

“Clare!”

“Contrary to what, I believe, is the usual opinion, I’m inclined to think that men can be even greater fools than women. Take Walter Palgrave—the most charming of men, and the biggest simpleton. He probably blames our dear uncle for everything, but if it hadn’t been uncle, it would have been another. He was bound to be devoured by someone. He is one of those fools who have money who are made for men who have brains. Born with a silver spoon in his mouth, he might have made for himself a great career; instead of which he’s wandering about the world, in a dinner jacket, with the police at his heels.”

“If they catch him!”

“As I’ve already said, then we may have to come

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to a fresh understanding, but we'll wait until they do. If Inspector Felkin adequately represents the police, I should say he's in no danger—I hope, Elsie, you're not going to make an idiot of yourself."

"In what way?"

"I trust—you must excuse my putting it coarsely—you're not going to jilt Rupert Earle?"

"Do you think I could marry him?"

"You said you would."

"Last night!"

"You love him."

"Now?"

"Now! You're not the sort of girl who can stop loving a man to order."

"Even if what you say is true, you wouldn't advise me to marry him—you couldn't!"

"Who is it says morality's a question of degrees of latitude? I believe in some parts of America all gentlemen carry a gun; they did as recently as yesterday. Not long ago I heard uncle say that he knew a woman—an American woman, a nice American woman—whose husband had used his gun quite a deal; he himself did not know just how much. Uncle said she was the happiest wife he had ever met, and her husband was devotion itself. Contrary to the received tradition, I don't think it's easy for any woman to care about any man, but if she does care for one man, that's all she need care about."

"I don't agree with you."

"You do. That's your feeling, even more strongly

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than it is mine. You care for Rupert Earle as you'll never care for anyone else; if you won't let him make you his wife you'll be a sorry woman all your life."

"Then I'll be a sorry woman. Chinese tortures wouldn't make me marry Rupert Earle; I'd sooner kill myself a thousand times."

Miss Grahame rushed out of the room before her cousin had time to speak another word. Mrs. Harmar, left alone, with a whimsical smile, surveyed the ribbons which she had been so neatly arranging. She proposed to herself rather a singular problem.

"I wonder, if Edwin were not my husband, if I would marry him—now?"

All at once she laid herself face downward on the bed, and, without any apparent reason, she began to cry.

CHAPTER V

THE WILL WHICH WAS PRODUCED AND THE WILL WHICH WASN'T

THE tragedy occurred on Friday night ; the coroner commenced his inquest on the following Tuesday ; John Culver was buried on the Thursday. It looked at first as if a Mr. Fincham, who had acted as a sort of confidential clerk, and Isaac Lazarus, a solicitor, would be the only mourners. But, almost at the last moment, Mrs. Harmar induced her husband to go, and, at Harmar's suggestion, Rupert Earle went to keep him company.

"The idea," Earle told him, "of my figuring as a mourner at John Culver's funeral is something more than the height of the ridiculous."

"You've as much reason to mourn as I have," was Harmar's retort.

A great crowd was at the grave, drawn, doubtless, for the most part by vulgar curiosity, though among them were some, not friends—John Culver had no friends—but chiefly neighbours, who wished to show, by their presence, sympathy on so tragic an occasion. Whether the sympathy was intended to be shown to the one who had gone, or to those who were left, was doubtful.

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After the funeral there assembled in the morning-room at Timberham four persons : Mrs. Harmar and Miss Grahame, as representing John Culver's only known relations ; Edwin Harmar, as the husband of one of the ladies ; and Isaac Lazarus, as the man of law. Rupert Earle had been asked to be present, but, declining, had betaken himself he alone knew where. Mr. Lazarus was short and puny, with carefully trimmed moustache and curly black locks. He wore a flourishing air, and a diamond ring on his right hand little finger. A pair of gold-rimmed glasses were balanced on his nose, through which he seemed to beam. About him was an atmosphere of geniality, which was, perhaps, occasionally a trifle overdone. He opened the proceedings in a voice which his late client, who had a keen eye for physical peculiarities, had been wont to describe as "juicy."

"I suppose it is hardly necessary for me to tell you that it is only in a very limited sense that I can describe myself as the late Mr. Culver's solicitor. And here, since I may have to touch on delicate matters, may I ask, ladies, if I have your permission to speak plainly ?"

"You can speak as plainly as you like."

This was Mrs. Harmar. Elsie, sitting bolt upright on her chair, said nothing. Mr. Lazarus accepted her silence as signifying acquiescence.

"Thank you, ladies, thank you ; it is always well on these occasions to know what line one is to take, though I assure you I won't speak any more plainly than I can help. It's no secret, to begin with, that the late Mr.

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Culver employed, in his time, probably more solicitors than any other man in England. Practically he had one in every town in England ; one or other of them was always at work for him. He had his own ways of doing business ; one of his ways was to regard a solicitor as a sort of thumbscrew, to be used whenever necessity required ; I fear sometimes when there was no absolute necessity. If one of his innumerable debtors was five minutes in arrears, a local solicitor was set at him before he was ten. He was a remarkable man. I was only connected with him in what I would term certain intimate personal matters ; I never acted for him in the ordinary—that is, his ordinary way of business. For instance, I drew up for him his will ; perhaps I had better say a will—it's in this envelope."

He held up the envelope for them to see.

"This will was drawn up and duly executed rather more than four years ago. Some nine months ago he told me, in my office, that he had recently drawn up another will, but it has not been found. As I need not tell you, owing to certain painful occurrences, we have only been able to search for it to a limited extent ; he may have kept it in any one of twenty places to which access has not yet been obtained ; and it may yet be discovered. Under these circumstances it is for you, ladies, to say if you would like me to read to you the document which I have in this envelope."

Mrs. Harmar was again the first to answer.

"I don't see any reason why you shouldn't read it. I don't know, Elsie, if you do."

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Miss Grahame's tone and manner could hardly have been more frigid.

"As you please ; I'm indifferent. Mr. Lazarus can read what he likes."

"Thank you, ladies ; I have again to thank you."

It was wonderful how thankful Mr. Lazarus was able to be for a very little. He proceeded to read, badly, what seemed to his auditors to be an interminable farrago of unintelligible phrases. Mrs. Harmar cut him ruthlessly short.

"Really, Mr. Lazarus, I'm afraid we don't understand very clearly what it is you're reading. Can't you tell us, briefly, what all that comes to ?"

"Certainly, and with pleasure. This will, Mrs. Harmar, practically leaves you everything your uncle died possessed of. With the exception of certain legacies, among them being an annuity of £60 per annum to his servant, Alfred Tyrrell, you get all."

"Do you mean to say that my cousin gets nothing ?"

"In this will Miss Grahame's name is not mentioned."

"But it's monstrous, ridiculous, absurd. My dear Elsie, did you ever know anything so silly ? But I'm sure you won't imagine that I'm going to rob you."

Mrs. Harmar, who had risen excitedly from her seat, was standing in front of Miss Grahame, who was calmness personified.

"Uncle was at liberty to do as he liked with his

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own. How will you be robbing me by observing his wishes?"

"His wishes! As if anyone cared for the wishes of such an one as he was! Mr. Lazarus, suppose that will were not in existence, what would be the result?"

"If no other was discovered, Mr. Culver would be presumed to have died intestate. His property would be divided, in certain recognised proportions, between his next of kin."

"Whose property are those sheets of paper you are holding in your hand?"

"That's not an easy question to answer. This document, being the original will, has, after certain formalities have been observed, to be deposited at Somerset House, where it will be kept for purposes of reference."

"Suppose I were to tear it to pieces, and put the pieces on the fire?"

"Then you would have to stand your trial on a criminal charge, and would, beyond doubt, be severely punished. This is certainly not your property. The law very correctly regards a will, especially when the testator is dead, as a very sacred instrument."

"But I am not forced to do what that paper says."

"As regards yourself, no. You need not accept a penny of your uncle's money; or, having accepted it, you can pass it on to Brown, Jones, or Robinson. But let me point out that it is by no means clear that this will is valid—in other words, that it is your

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uncle's last will and testament. Perhaps I had better explain exactly what the situation is."

"You certainly had; as it is, it seems to me to be intolerable."

"In the first place, let me point out that nothing is more natural than the absence, from this document, of Miss Grahame's name."

"Why do you say that? You have not the slightest right to say it."

"It is a question of dates. This will is dated nearly four years ago. At that period you were unmarried, you lived with your uncle; I doubt if you realised that you had any other relative in the world."

"That's true; I didn't. You know, Elsie, how secretive he was."

"Of course I know."

"More than twelve months after this will was signed, to the best of my knowledge and belief, Mrs. Grahame wrote from New Zealand to Mr. Culver to call his attention, for the first time, to the fact of her existence. I remember his telling me that he had lately heard from a sister who, he had supposed, had been dead for years. I can, if I refer, give you the exact date on which he told me that. Do you see that the omission of Miss Grahame's name from this will is explained? When it was drawn he did not know there was a Miss Grahame. We now come to the question of a later will. Miss Grahame arrived in England, at her uncle's invitation, rather more than two years ago."

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"She came a week before my marriage, just in time to be my bridesmaid. I shouldn't have had a bridesmaid if it hadn't been for her."

"As I have said, some nine months ago he told me that he had made another will; I asked him who had drawn it, and he informed me Messrs. Meerham and Kirby, a firm of the highest standing. When, on Saturday, I heard of Mr. Culver's tragic fate, I thought it my duty to communicate with them, and they advised me, in the strictest confidence, what was the purport of that will; they have a draft of the instructions they received from him, and on which they acted."

"What was its purport?"

"It upset this one entirely. Miss Grahame was to have far the larger part of the estate; your share was to be a comparatively insignificant one, and there were various legacies."

"In whose custody was that will placed?"

"That's the point. Meerham tells me that it was executed in his presence, and that then Culver took it away with him—as he understood, to Timberham—to his house. From observations he has made at different times, I have reason to believe that that will was quite lately in existence. Meerham says that when he was down here so lately as the week before last, he pointed out something in the grounds which he thought might be altered with advantage; that Mr. Culver replied that it would do for his time, and that he had no doubt that when Miss Grahame came into possession

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she'd turn the whole place upside down—which seems to suggest that the will was existing then."

"Obviously, and will shortly be found. So that that's so much waste paper. Is it allowed to ask what I am to have under this other will?"

"Five hundred pounds a year."

It was Miss Grahame's turn to start from her chair.

"Five hundred a year!" she cried. "Then that's a much more ridiculous will than this!" She turned to her cousin. "Do you suppose I'm going to take practically everything, and leave you with such a pittance as that?"

"One can exist on £500 a year."

"You can't, and, if I've a word to say in the matter, you're not going to try. No one, so far as I'm concerned, need trouble to look for such a will as that, because I'll have nothing to do with it if it is found."

Edwin Harmar interposed, speaking for the first time.

"Gently, you two, gently. Don't you think that this discussion might, with advantage, be postponed? At present we don't know where we are; let's wait until we do. Since, apparently, neither of you wishes to take advantage of the other, then you should be able to come to some quite equitable arrangement. In the meantime, may I ask, Mr. Lazarus, if Mr. Culver has left anything behind?"

"My dear sir, he's left an enormous sum of money. A large part of it is out at interest, on all sorts of

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security, in all kinds of places; that part of the estate may take some time to realise. I don't know if either of you ladies would be inclined to carry on the business?"

"What business? That of usury? And such odious usury! Thank you, Mr. Lazarus, you flatter me."

This was Mrs. Harmar. Her cousin was even more emphatic.

"When I think of how he got his money I feel as if I could not bring myself to touch a penny of it; indeed, I am not sure that I shall not decline to touch a penny under any circumstances whatever."

"Let me advise you, Miss Grahame, not to be so quixotic."

Mr. Lazarus, pressing the tips of his fingers together, regarded the ardent young lady with a beaming smile. He went on.

"It is within my knowledge that my late client had investments of a more normal kind, which could, if necessary, be readily turned into cash, and which would probably produce a sum of at least half a million. I believe I am within the mark when I say that, though he maintained such a modest establishment, the late John Culver will be proved to have been a very wealthy man, probably something more than a millionaire."

"And," said Miss Grahame to her cousin, "out of that mountain of money you're to have five hundred a year!"

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"My dear Elsie," rejoined Mrs. Harmar, "by that will you're to have nothing."

"Who's to have five hundred a year? And who's to have nothing?"

The inquiry came from Rupert Earle, who stood at the open French window.

"You were good enough to ask me to assist at your little confabulation, but as it was by way of being a family matter I thought that it would be better perhaps that I should take a stroll in the woods. I hope that everything's turned out satisfactorily for everyone concerned?"

Miss Grahame, who chanced to be nearest to the window, chose to take the question as being addressed specially to her.

"Quite, thank you—for me. Will you be so good as to let me pass?"

Without waiting for him to reply she swept by him into the grounds. He stood looking after her, then turned to Mrs. Harmar.

"Which means?"

The lady shrugged her shoulders. "It sounds ridiculous, but, honestly, I don't know what it means, except that it may mean that it's always risky for a mere man to try to play the part of Providence. May I also go?"

He moved aside to let her pass, then touched her husband on the arm.

"Harmar, which mere man does your wife suggest has played the part of Providence—you—or me?"

CHAPTER VI

THE MISSING GENTLEMAN

A CORONER'S curiosity is apt to seem insatiable. No one may count on being beyond its reach. Everyone who slept at Timberham on that fateful night became a victim to his desire to know. Mr. and Mrs. Harmar, Miss Grahame, and Mr. Earle, each in turn was called upon to be a witness—obviously unwilling witnesses they were. Much that they would prefer to have kept hidden was dragged into the light, yet, wittingly or not, they managed to convey the impression that, in spite of all that the coroner could do, they were concealing much that they might, if they chose, have made known.

From the first Inspector Felkin's theory was adopted by the court. Nothing had been seen or heard of Mr. Walter Palgrave. It did seem extraordinary that a man leaving Timberham in the circumstances he had done could have so completely escaped observation. The one clear fact seemed to be that he had got out of a window in the middle of the night, hatless, coatless, and in a dinner suit; beyond that nothing was either known or, in the course of the inquest, could be discovered. The coroner appeared to have got two

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alternative explanations into his head. The first was that, in the course of his flight, he had met with an untoward fate, but of that there was not a vestige of proof. In the immediate neighbourhood there was no water in which he could have been drowned, no precipice over which he could have fallen. Had he committed suicide, or himself been murdered, there would surely have been something to show for it. There was absolutely nothing.

Failing this first explanation, the coroner fell back on what appeared to him to be a possible second. In some of the questions which he put to witnesses he more than hinted that Walter Palgrave was still at Timberham, or its immediate neighbourhood—or somewhere—to the knowledge and with the connivance of some member or members of John Culver's household. All the witnesses swore that they were in complete ignorance of Mr. Palgrave's whereabouts and of his movements generally, since he was supposed to have retired to rest at two o'clock on that eventful morning. Yet one felt that the coroner was still unconvinced. The attitude he took up was that it was a sheer impossibility for a gentleman attired as Palgrave must have been to avoid discovery unless he was aided and abetted by someone. It was daylight soon after he left; someone must have seen him, with surprise at the sight of a gentleman tramping the country in such a garb. He had walked more than ninety miles if he had walked to London; he must have halted

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somewhere for refreshment, where again his costume would have attracted attention. The police had made minute inquiries, yet nothing had been reported. If he had travelled by rail his appearance would have caused comment. If he had bought other clothes, or changed those he had, there seemed to be a dozen obvious reasons why the fact must have become known.

He had chambers in town, a house in Wiltshire ; nothing was to be learnt of him at either. He had various relatives ; so far as could be ascertained nothing had been seen or heard of him by them—in any case it was not easy to see how, without an accomplice, he could have reached them. The coroner made it tolerably clear that, in his opinion, the missing man could not have remained missing had he not had an associate or associates, and that the probabilities were that those associates were members of the Timberham household. Although he did not actually do so, so far as the impression made on the public mind was concerned he might just as well have named names.

As the inquest proceeded the impression grew stronger that Mr. Walter Palgrave was keeping himself out of the way for a very sufficient reason. One damaging piece of evidence after another came out against him. It was shown that not only had he lived a dissipated and reckless life, but also that he was a discredited and ruined man. All his available property was pledged as security for loans from John Culver ;

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for some time he had been living on those advances. Latterly Culver had refused to advance more. In his efforts to obtain cash from other sources he had, with a view of concealing the real state of affairs, made statements which might easily have brought him within reach of the criminal law. John Culver, learning this, had called him sharply to book. In consequence he had uttered threats which, in the light of recent events, were capable of the most sinister interpretation. On the day before he came to Timberham he had called at the office in town and publicly declared that if Culver did not let him have more money he would kill him; the fact that he had been drinking did not make matters much better.

It was known that the title deeds of Mr. Palgrave's Wiltshire estates were at Timberham. Culver, whose age and infirmities made travelling difficult, and who transacted a great deal of business at his country house, having had his own way of doing things, had a habit of keeping a large number of such documents, at least temporarily, within his immediate reach. Mr. Fincham, Culver's confidential clerk, stated in evidence that the title deeds in question, together with other papers referring to Mr. Palgrave's indebtedness, were kept in the iron box which had been found open, and nearly empty, on the library floor. Search had been made for them everywhere, but they had not been found. Undoubtedly they had been taken out of the box.

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It was not strange that the jury, directed by the coroner, brought in a verdict of wilful murder against Walter Palgrave.

The news reached Timberham by telephone. John Culver had had a telephone installed in his library, and had been used, with its aid, to transact a great deal of business with his offices in different parts of the country. Miss Grahame had bribed one of the Timberham stable boys to get on to the telephone at the village post office the moment the verdict was given. She was sitting with Mrs. Harmar in the hall, with the library door wide open ; of late both ladies had evinced a distinct disinclination to sit in the library itself. Suddenly the telephone bell rang out. Miss Grahame, throwing down the book she was pretending to read, hurried through the open door. When Mrs. Harmar followed her she was holding the receiver to her ear.

“Is that you, Parsons ?” she was asking.

“If you please, miss,” came a voice along the wire, “the jury’s found Mr. Palgrave guilty of wilful murder.”

Miss Grahame waited to hear no more. The receiver fell from her hand on to the table with a crash. The two young women stood staring at each other ; it would have been difficult to determine which looked the more troubled. Mrs. Harmar whispered an inquiry.

“What is it ?”

There was a whispered answer, an echo of the

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stable boy's own words : "The jury's found Mr. Palgrave guilty of wilful murder."

There was silence, as if each were too deeply moved for speech. Then Miss Grahame asked, still in a whisper :

"What are you going to do ?"

"Nothing."

The reply was spoken in a louder tone, as if Mrs. Harmar wished the other to understand that loudness was synonymous with firmness. Miss Grahame looked at her, then, throwing herself across the table, burst into a passion of sobs. For some moments Mrs. Harmar made no attempt to restrain her, possibly because she was not sure that her own feelings were sufficiently under control to trust herself to speak. Then she said, with a touch of asperity which might have been intended to cover her consciousness of weakness :

"Elsie, what is the use of behaving like an idiot ? What can be done ? The verdict of a coroner's jury means nothing—nothing at all ! Before you make a fuss wait till—till the police have found him."

By way of answer, Miss Grahame, raising herself from the table, rushed weeping from the house.

CHAPTER VII

THE DELL

ELsie made straight for a certain dell which she knew in the woods. It had possibly once been a place from which gravel had been taken, but that was long ago. Thick matted turf hid any signs of such-like depredations. A tree which Elsie used to assure herself had once been struck by lightning stood on one of the slopes—something had severed the trunk within a few feet of its roots. What was left of it was still very much alive; it had often afforded Elsie support for her back and shelter for her head. During the bitter days she had known since her coming to England, as a stranger, to take up her abode at Timberham, she had often sought in this place for that peace of mind which she had not found in her uncle's house. It was but natural, in this her hour of anguish, that she should come to it again, as to a haven of refuge. She lay, face downward, on the moss and the grass, wrestling with those doubts and difficulties which had blotted out from her that glimpse of happiness which she believed herself to have achieved at last. How long she had lain there she did not know, nor how long she

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would have continued to lie, had it not been for something which set every nerve in her body tingling. That something was the sound of a voice.

"Elsie!"

She lay quite still. The sound was so unexpected, so sweet, yet so terrible, that for a moment she did not dare to confront the man who addressed her by her Christian name. Presently he did it again; there was a tenderness in his tone which put her all in a flutter.

"Elsie!"

In a sudden rage, as if it were only in rage that she saw safety, twisting herself round she faced the speaker.

"How dare you come to me here!"

Rupert Earle stood looking down on her with that twinkle in his eyes which once she had liked so well, but which of late she had resented with a vigour which it seemed that nothing could make him realise. She was aware that he was noting the stains which the scarcely dried tears had left upon her countenance, but she chose to remain oblivious of the fact that in her appearance there was anything unusual. As he made no attempt to answer her angry question, she repeated it, more angrily still.

"Did you hear what I said? How dare you come to me here?"

Then he replied, in the most equable of tones, with twinkling eyes:

"You used to bring me with you here in the

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days that are gone—there was no question of daring. I have a better right to be with you here than I had then—where's the daring now?"

She got on to her feet, fanning her rage; ignore it as she might, possibly the consciousness of her dishevelled condition did not render her more amenable.

"Are you going?—or must I?"

"We are neither of us going, just yet."

She made a rapid movement towards the bank; moving more rapidly still, springing in front of her, he had her by the arms. Here was an excuse for fury. She raved at him.

"How dare you touch me? Let me go."

"Not until I have had that explanation with you to which I am entitled."

"How are you going to keep me here? By force?"

"I am going to keep you; *how* does not matter. I've waited patiently until that ridiculous coroner had brought his absurd inquest to a preposterous close; I've even kept away from Timberham lest my presence should annoy you."

"As if I hadn't seen you nearly every day!"

"That's not my fault, nor is it because I was at Timberham—perhaps it was because you wanted to."

"You dare to say it!"

"Anyhow, I am going to wait no longer. You and I are going to tell each other all that is in our minds."

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"Are we!"

"We are; I'm going to tell you all that is in my mind, and you're going to tell me all that is in yours. The only question is, if I loose you, will you promise to stop until we're through?"

"I'll promise nothing."

"Very good, then I'll have to go on holding; I'm willing. I'm only afraid that I may hurt you."

"You've hurt me already."

"I'm sorry, but, unless I find a cord and tie you to a tree, or something else of that sort, I don't see how I'm going to manage. As I said, I'm going to keep you here; just how is a matter for your consideration rather than for mine."

"Oh, don't be so insane!—let me go!—I'll stop. When I've had my say it will be you who'll want to go."

"Maybe, but I'm going to have my say first. I'm going to start with the axiom that we love each other."

"I deny it."

"Then you say the thing which is not. You told me that you loved me, and you're not the sort that changes."

"Love may be killed in a night."

"Not in your case, nor in mine. We're the kind who, when we love, love always, through good report and evil."

"I presume it is useless to ask you, in such a matter, to speak for yourself."

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"Well, I am speaking for myself. I go back to the axiom that we love each other. Just let me go on talking. If you'll let me get out a sentence or two you'll find I'll reach a point where we'll be in agreement. What I understand is that, though we love each other, you're not going to own it, and you're not over anxious to be my wife——"

"I'll never be your wife!"

"Because—it is not a pleasant thing to have to say, but if it must be said, it were best said bluntly —you believe me to have killed old Culver."

He paused, as if for her to speak, but she said nothing. She stood looking at him, with her left hand held a little behind her, so that her finger tips touched the trunk of the storm-riven oak, as if the contact afforded her support and sympathy. He put to her a question.

"Do I not put the case quite clearly?"

She continued silent.

"Will you be so good as to favour me with an answer?"

This time she spoke.

"I'll speak when you have finished. You informed me that you were going to have the first say; I'm waiting for you to have it."

"Is that so? Then with one statement I've done. If that is your belief you're wrong, utterly. I've had no more to do with John Culver's death than you had."

She shrank close towards the tree, as if she

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desired to feel it at her back. Her eyes seemed suddenly to have grown larger and rounder.

"How dare you say that?"

"Simply because it's true. Don't let me be misunderstood. I hold that there are men who, like poisonous snakes, are best killed. John Culver was one of them. I'd have thought as little of killing him as of killing some noxious insect—if I had killed him; only—it so happens that I didn't. Therefore, if the idea that I did has induced you to hold me at arm's length, I've been hardly used."

"Yet I will have none of you."

As she spoke it was as if a light had illumined all her face.

"Why?—Since we love each other?"

"You know."

"I do not."

"You either say the thing which is not, or you are duller than I supposed."

Something in her words or manner seemed to tickle him. The corners of his lips were wrinkled by a smile. He looked down as he dug the toe of his boot into the turf. It was some seconds before he spoke, then it was with the air of one who knows that what he says is funny.

"It's true that I robbed him."

"That you do admit."

"Of my own."

"Each man has his own gloss; I never doubted you had yours. Now let me speak. So far as I'm

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concerned you are welcome to take any view of your own conduct you please. I don't want your confidence—I refuse to have it. I wish to know neither what you have done nor left undone. My position is that so long as you tell me nothing, I know nothing ; that position I wish to maintain. As regards my attitude towards you—nothing will change that, rest assured. I don't know what my movements will be, but, if necessary, to avoid you, I'll go back to New Zealand, or farther. That ought not to be necessary. If you have any of those decent instincts with which once I credited you, you'll not compel me to fly from you—you'll keep yourself away from me. I have only one favour to ask ; that is, that you may never let me see you again. You said you loved me ; prove it—by granting me my prayer."

There was something about him, as she spoke, which suggested that he was rather occupied with his own thoughts than listening to her. He had never once looked up, but kept his eyes cast down as if he were interested not so much in what she was saying as in what he saw on the turf. The remark which he made, when she ceased speaking, had no apparent relevancy to any words of hers. It came from him as if, absent-mindedly, he was uttering his thoughts aloud.

"I'm an inventor."

"I've not a doubt of it."

Her prompt acquiescence seemed to recall him to

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himself. He glanced up at her, for a second, as if startled ; then again his glance fell.

“Not in that sense only.”

He said it with a smile.

“I’m an inventor also of things—that unhappiest of men. Ever since I’ve been in the world I’ve been inventing something which was an improvement on what there was before, and no one would believe it. Some of my inventions have brought money to other men, but they’ve brought me nothing, not even fame.”

“I’ve heard all this before.”

“You’re going to hear it all again, because it leads to something which you have not heard before. My life has been one of those which, when one looks back, make one wonder why one ever went on living. It’s been failure, failure, all the way—until about two years ago. My first glimpse of success came with my first sight of you.”

“That’s nonsense.”

“It’s gospel truth. For me to see you was for me to love you, and in that first hour in which I fell in love with you I had my first clear peep of the thing which, shortly, will place me in possession of riches compared to which the well-advertised fortunes of your American plutocrats will be as nothing.”

“Of course.”

“As you say, of course. I have invented what practically amounts to perpetual motion.”

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"I fancy you are not the first person who has believed himself to have done so."

"You're right, I'm not—but I'm the first person who knows he has. This is the age of motors. You have your motor-car to take you up to town."

"I haven't."

"No, but you will have, before very long."

"I doubt it."

"I don't. One form of motor grinds your corn, another drives great ships across the sea. For the purpose of my argument all engines are motors, and all motors stand for power."

"Is this a scientific lecture ?"

"It's not. I'm getting to a certain point, and if you'll let me go my own way I'll get there quicker. Power is best got from electricity ; it's the electricity which is so hard to get. Its production is so costly and uncertain that, for many purposes, it's discredited, and those precisely the purposes for which it's most adapted. Now I've discovered how, after the initial cost, electricity may be produced for nothing ; in other words, I've found out how it may be made to produce itself. I have, in a workshop of mine, an engine not bigger than that." He held his hands about two feet apart. "I started it working some five months ago ; it has been working continually, day and night, ever since, without water, coal, oil, or fuel of any sort or kind—at absolutely no cost, for power, to me or to anyone else. I'm willing to bet a trifle that it will continue to work, under similar

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conditions, practically for ever, at any rate until it dies of sheer old age."

"You never told me anything about that before."

"I wasn't likely to talk about a thing like that to anyone but the woman who was going to be my wife. How long ago is it that you promised that you would? And how many opportunities have I had of talking to you since?"

"I never will be your wife, never!"

"Well, I've started talking to you as if we were going to be married next week, and I'm going to keep on. I did tell you that I've been all my life pretty nearly penniless. My engine, in its initiatory stages, cost money; it kept costing money as it passed from stage to stage. I got that money from old Culver, who had pocketed the profits which other inventions of mine had produced. I had been getting money from him when I first saw you, standing on the lawn in front of his window. I thought you were an angel dropped out of heaven."

"Stuff!"

"Perhaps, but it's of such stuff that men's happiest dreams are made. As I said, in that same hour I got my first clear peep at the thing I was after, as if your coming meant to me not only the advent of love, but of sight."

"Do you suppose you please me by saying such things?"

"I'm indifferent—I please myself. I kept getting money from Culver, and Culver kept getting more of

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my engine, until at last, when beyond the shadow of a doubt I had achieved success and, like a fool, told him so, he made it clear to me that to all intents and purposes he had got it all."

Mr. Earle, jingling the coins in his trousers pockets, laughed ruefully.

"He told me plainly that if I did not return to him, in an impossibly short space of time, the advance he had made to me, he would take from me my engine and my invention would become his, the result of which would be that he would become the richest man in the world and I should be still a beggar. A pleasant intimation to receive when, after a life of failure, I had succeeded beyond my wildest expectations."

Again there was the impatient gesture and the rueful laugh.

"When I tell you that it was on the same day on which John Culver gave me that intimation that I asked you to be my wife, you will begin to understand that my love for you had got me so that I could no longer hold out against it; although it looked as if I were a hopeless and a ruined man, I had to tell you that I loved you. You perhaps noticed that I did not talk to you just as I might have done had I been in an optimistic frame of mind."

"What does it matter how you talked to me?"

"Exactly; as I won you, as you told me that you loved me, I agree with you that nothing else

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does matter. Here we come to a nice point in ethics. You remember that interrupted kiss?"

"I remember nothing, I will remember nothing—if you were the man I imagined you to be you would not remember anything either."

"Ah, but I'm not that man, any more than you seem to be that girl, though I fancy that at bottom we both are what we thought we were, only, so far as I am concerned, something is temporarily obscuring your usually clear vision. Those beautiful eyes of yours were given you so that you might see right into the very heart of a man, and presently you'll see all that there is to be seen in mine and—you'll be kinder. However, there was an interruption, which we have both of us forgotten; it seems a tall thing to ask you to believe, but at the very moment of that forgotten interruption there came into my head an idea, which has caused trouble, but which I don't regret, or ever shall, and which you won't either, by the time we've done."

He stretched out his arms as if, by the gesture, he would recall the occasion of which he spoke. She, with her glance fixed always on him, shrank closer to the tree, as from the invitation which the action might imply.

"As that evening in the garden you slipped from my arms at the mathematical moment, while I was swearing at the intruder I was also swearing to myself—of such dual action is the brain capable—that I'd not be beggared, diddled, and robbed again

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by old Culver as I had been so often before, but that, if any robbery had to be done, I'd do a little on my own account. I knew where he kept the papers which he'd told me to my face he meant to use to rob me of my engine—I'd rob him of the weapons with which he proposed to arm himself to plunder me. And—I did. In the dead of night I opened the box in which he kept them—it was one of his peculiarities that he kept so much of the booty of which he had plundered others where it could easily be taken from him—and I made of them a bonfire in my bedroom grate. I knew the precise sum he'd lent me, and, papers or no papers, I was prepared to return it to him, with interest at the rate of a hundred per cent., or a thousand ; only, if I could help it, I'd not let him rob me of all the fruits of my lifelong labours. I have made to you a complete confession of my guilt. I had no hand in the old man's death ; I know no more than you who had."

Again he paused, as if for her to speak. Shrinking closer and closer to the tree, she kept still.

"Don't you believe me ?"

"What does it matter what I believe ?"

He observed her curiously. She spoke as if her throat were dry ; on her face there was a look as of actual physical pain.

"I suppose you were disturbed in your sleep. I remember that I dropped the box, which was heavier than I expected, on to the floor with rather a bang ;

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I wondered if anyone would hear. I take it that you did, and came out of your bedroom to learn the cause of the noise, and that then you saw me—though how you can have seen me without my seeing you I do not understand, nor why you connected me with Culver's death, since I saw nothing of him from first to last. Come, be as frank with me as I have been with you; it's only fair. Tell me all you imagine yourself to have seen and heard."

"What difference would it make?"

"To me, apparently, it would make all the difference in the world."

"You are mistaken; it would make none. I will tell you nothing; you will do me the justice to remember that I told you that I wished you to tell me nothing."

She stopped. He waited for her to go on, then asked her:

"What does that mean?—what you have just now said?"

"It means that I have nothing to add to what I told you at first—that henceforward you and I must be strangers."

"But why?"

"I am not compelled to give you a reason."

"In honour you are compelled—if a woman knows what honour is."

"I'll give you no reason. I ask you—what I asked at the beginning—to go."

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"You announced, with a flourish, that when you had had your say it would be me who would wish to go."

"Don't you? Surely you cannot wish to stay with a woman who'd cut off her right hand if doing it would put you—and keep you—a thousand miles from her."

"I've a mind to take you in my arms and have my fill of kisses, while you fight and scream and scratch."

"You are mistaken; you have no such mind—you are not that kind of man."

"There you are right—I'm not; I'd have nothing from you which you would not give me. But since I love you and know that you love me—I notice that you've never once denied that you do love me—I dare you to deny it now."

Although he held his peace his challenge went unanswered. He interrupted her silence in his own fashion.

"Since, therefore, it's evident that you do love me, it's only a question of time, probably of only a very short time, and you'll be willing to give me all I want; then, sweetheart, when the scales shall have fallen from your eyes and your heart be softened, we will be glad together. I've done so much waiting in my life, I'll wait still a little longer—for that good time to come."

CHAPTER VIII

THE RIVEN OAK

HE had gone. She could hear him as he went striding with great steps through the brushwood, whistling cheerily, merrily, as he went. It was as though he whistled defiance, as though he wished her to understand that he cared nothing for her, or for her unkindness. But she knew better. She knew he cared, because she cared too, all the more because she knew that his intention was to hide from her, so far as he was able, how much he cared. The sound of his whistling went through her like a knife, occasioning her such pain that she had to turn and hide her face against the trunk of the friendly tree.

She had sent him away. If she raised her voice and called to him, how gladly, when he heard her, would he come hastening back, and how glad she would be to see him. Her heart leapt in her bosom at the thought with such force that it took all her breath away, and she panted as she leaned against the tree. But she could not do that—never ; she could never welcome him again. He did not know it, but she knew. That kiss, which had been begun, never

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would be finished ; their lips would never meet again. He was quite right ; she was one of those women who, loving once, love always—more was the pity. If her love for him might pass it would not so much matter, but it would not ; whatever might betide, it would be in some corner of her heart until her dying day ; nothing could ever drive it out.

But one thing was sure—if she could not conceal it from herself she could hide it from the world. Perhaps not from him, but, if needs be, she would put more than the thousand miles of which she had spoken between herself and him. There was her cousin Clare—she would not be easy to deceive ; Clare understood her almost as well as he did. She, on her side, understood Clare better than Clare herself supposed ; there was that between them which was as a bond which never could be broken. Let Clare know—it was vain to attempt to hide the truth from her ; she might be trusted not to take any unfriendly advantage of her knowledge. But the rest of the world should not know. She would go about in it with a smiling face, and none should guess that in her heart there was a pain that never ceased.

She drew herself away from the tree, looking about her—raising her arms above her head, as if she would proclaim aloud the resolution at which she had arrived. When she lifted her arms a strange thing happened. The tree, as has been said, was but a torso. There remained but five or six feet of the trunk. When, as she was doing then, she stood

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beneath it on the slope, it was taller than she was ; if she went to the other side, on the higher ground, it was just about as tall. How little of it, however, there really was, was not perceptible to the casual, unobservant eye, owing to the fact that from all round the top of it had sprung branches which were so close together that, at least in the time of leaf, its scanty proportions were not revealed. Nature had so shaped these branches that in spring and summer they were as a vernal crown, lending such dignity to the parent trunk that a stranger might easily have supposed that there was much more of it than there actually was. In raising her arms Elsie Grahame had parted that portion of the foliage which was nearest to her, and made obvious what she knew already, that to a considerable extent the trunk was hollow.

But she had done more than this. Ever since her coming to Timberham she had regarded the dell as her own especial portion of the woods. She had spent hours in it alone, at all seasons of the year. She had worked in it, read in it, dreamed in it. She had explored it, as a woman does explore a place in which she spends an appreciable portion of her time ; she knew its every corner ; in particular, she knew that riven oak. She very quickly learned that portions of it were hollow ; when the leaves were there their presence was hidden, they were plainer when the leaves had gone. She had used the hollows, not necessarily as hiding places, but as places in which she might store odds and ends which she might want

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in the dell, and did not care to carry backward and forward to the house.

That movement of her arm had disclosed to her the fact that someone else seemed to have used them for a similar purpose. One of the shorter branches, which were rather twigs, had caught in her sleeve. Turning to disengage it, she saw, in a hollow place which the leaves obscured, a gleam of something white. It was nothing of hers—she had had nothing there for weeks. But if it was not hers, whose else could it be? The question startled her. Someone besides herself must have a knowledge of her dell and of the hollows in her tree. She looked about her with wide-open eyes, as if she suspected that that someone was there at that very moment. But no one was in sight and all was very still. It was absurd to allow herself to be disturbed by such a trifle. Perhaps, after all, what she had seen was something of her own which she had forgotten. She went a little higher up the slope, quite close to the tree, and, parting the branches, looked in. As she did so a shiver went all over her, as if it had all at once turned cold.

Loosing the branches she moved a step from the tree, down the slope, having touched nothing. It was extraordinary into what a state of nervous trepidation she had suddenly got, for no apparent reason. She glanced about her, this way and that, as if she were afraid of the rustling leaves. When a pheasant, at a distance, went whirring up into the air, she put

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her hands up to her bosom, trembling as if it had been a sound of doom. She was conscious of the absurdity of her own conduct—she told herself so out loud.

“What an idiot I am! What a silly!”

Yet, though she owned her folly, she seemed incapable, for the moment, of anything else. A perceptible period of time elapsed before she gathered sufficient resolution to enable her to pursue her researches into what was hidden in that hollow in the tree. Then it was with an obvious effort that she reached the sticking point. She turned, with a start, and, with another start, turned back again; then, as if unwillingly, returned to the tree. She raised her hands—so slowly that one wondered if the muscles of the arms could have suddenly grown stiff—and slowly parted the leaves. This time she continued, motionless, to stare into the hollow.

There seemed nothing very dreadful to stare at, or very wonderful, although it was curious how such things could have got there. In it there were a number of papers, looking for the most part like legal documents—blue, that aggressive legal blue, and white. Bundles of what seemed to be parchments, some yellow with age, some white as if they had been new yesterday—it was the gleam of their whiteness which had first of all caught her eye. A heterogeneous collection, especially to be in such a place. From where she stood she could not see all that was there. It was a good-sized hollow and was

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nearly as full as it could hold. On the top was an envelope, an oblong envelope, perhaps nine or ten inches long. It fascinated her, that envelope ; it was so close to her, lying so that she could see that something was written, or rather scrawled, across the face of it. She knew that scrawl, or thought she did. Unless she erred it was a sample of what her uncle, old John Culver, had called, sometimes it almost seemed humorously, his writing. When he was younger it was conceivable that he might have written a legible hand ; he certainly had not done so when she knew him, when he was old. She recalled the difficulty with which she, assisted by her friends and neighbours, had spelled out the epistle in which he had summoned her from New Zealand to Timberham. Later, more than one person had told her that he purposely wrote as badly as he could in order that, if it suited him, what he had written might be capable of various interpretations. Certainly his communications were apt to seem rather hieroglyphics than letters of an English gentleman.

If on the face of that envelope there was not an example of her uncle's hieroglyphics, then the resemblance was amazing. She stared at it as if she could not take her eyes away. Presently, advancing her hand, she picked it up between her finger and thumb ; she must make sure. She did make sure ; she was certain it was her uncle's scrawl, though, as usual, for some seconds she could not make out what it stood for. Then, all in an instant, it came to her, as it

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were, with a rush, and as it came she turned white and red, and red and white; her jaw dropped, her eyes opened so wide that they seemed to have become distended to an unnatural size. And, all in the same instant, there was the sound behind her of footsteps. Dropping the envelope back into the hollow, turning, she ran down the slope, sinking on to the grass at the bottom as if she were in such a tremblement that she could no longer stand upon her feet.

CHAPTER IX

THE REV. PETER MENZIES

HER first impression was that the footsteps belonged to Rupert Earle, who, in spite of her prohibition, had returned. But the voice which presently addressed her from the top of the bank on the other side of the little dell made it clear that in so thinking she was mistaken.

“Good afternoon, Miss Grahame.”

The speaker's appearance as, glancing up, she saw him standing with a straw hat in one hand and a thick stick in the other, seemed to surprise her even more than Mr. Earle's would have done. He was a short, cobbily built person, who, although he was possibly somewhere in the thirties, had about him an indefinable air of youth which made him look almost as if he were a boy, and would probably keep him looking like a boy for many a year to come. His costume was of such a nondescript sort that it was only after careful consideration that one arrived at the conclusion that he might be a parson. As a matter of fact, his style and title was the Rev. Peter Menzies, and he was the local vicar.

Peter Menzies was not only Elsie Grahame's one friend in that countryside—she was inclined sometimes

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to believe that he was the only real friend she had in the world. There was no one she would have sooner seen, yet she would prefer that he should have kept away from the dell just then. Her thoughts were of the hollow in the oak ; she cast about in her mind how she could dismiss him quickest, and so return to an examination of its contents. Perhaps he was but strolling through the woods, and had only stopped to exchange with her a sentence or two ; in that case her task might be easy. His next remark, however, made it clear that it would not be so easy as she had hoped.

"I hope I'm not intruding on my lady's bower. The truth is, I came to look for you, and just now I heard you talking to someone else, so I went on, hoping that when I returned I should find you alone, and I have—which shows that I'm in luck. With your permission I'll sit down."

Without waiting for her permission to be accorded he did sit down, on a little hummock, which served him very well as a seat. He laid his straw hat on the grass at his side ; holding his stick with both hands he looked across the top of it at her. She was thinking of what he had said—that he had heard her talking to someone else. That someone else could only have been Rupert Earle. She wondered what part of their conversation, if any, had reached his ears. They had not been talking very gently ; he might have heard something which they would very much rather he had not heard. At the thought something began fluttering again in her breast,

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yet she did not dare to put to him a direct question. Neither his words nor his manner suggested that he had been the involuntary recipient of any damaging confidences ; perhaps, beyond the fact that someone was talking to her, he had heard nothing at all.

“ You and I have been good friends, Miss Grahame, haven’t we ? ”

“ Very.”

She spoke meekly. Although she gladly admitted their friendship she did wish he would go away. What could he have to say at such an inconvenient moment, with the mystery of those papers in the hollow just above her head waiting to be solved ?

“ Therefore, Miss Grahame, I need not tell you that not only am I no diplomatist, but that my capacity to say a thing just as it ought to be said is not to be relied upon. So if some of the things I’m going to say to you might, to put it mildly, be expressed differently, you’ll know it’s just because of my awkwardness and stupidity, because, if I could, I’d say everything just exactly as you’d like me to say it, but I can’t.”

In spite of herself she smiled. His modes of speech were certainly his own, though she had grown to like them none the less on that account. But just then she would have so much preferred his absence to his company that she as nearly as possible told him so.

“ I’m sure, Mr. Menzies, that you’ve always been much kinder to me than I deserved, but—I’ve rather a headache. If what you have to say to me isn’t very pressing, would you mind saying it another time ? ”

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She could hardly have spoken much plainer, yet it had not been plain enough for him.

"That's all right; I won't hurt your headache. The truth is, Miss Grahame, that postponing what I have to say will do me much more injury than saying it will do you; so, if you don't very much mind, I'll get it over, then it'll be done with."

What could she say? She leaned on her elbow and sighed. The mystery of the hollow certainly could not be solved till Mr. Menzies had taken himself away. Probably he wished to discuss with her some thorny point in parochial politics—some of the local topics were thorny ones. Yet his preliminary remarks did not seem to have any particular bearing on parochial matters.

"Ever since you came to this part of the world, Miss Grahame, you have been my right-hand man—you'll excuse the confusion of sexes, but you know what I mean. It is the simple, literal truth that I do not know what I should have done without you."

"You have had your sister, Mr. Menzies."

"My sister?—Laura?—yes; just so. Laura has been invaluable; in her own way, invaluable. But, at the same time, Laura has not been to me what you have been."

"That was hardly to be expected, was it? I am not your sister."

"No—thank heaven."

"I beg your pardon? Then you've had the curate."

"The curate? Exactly; beyond a doubt I've had

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the curate. Mr. Pattison is an excellent young man, a model young man—indeed I am sometimes led to wonder if he is not almost too model a young man for me. When, occasionally, I am alone with Mr. Pattison, and he looks at me, as he has a way of doing, I am inclined to ask myself if something has gone wrong with the scheme of creation ; and if he ought not to be the vicar and I the curate. There is that in his manner which suggests that he is so very much my senior and superior."

He paused, and, again in spite of herself, Miss Grahame smiled. Turning his stick upside down, the vicar waved the point in the air.

" You know, Miss Grahame, strictly between our selves, I sometimes wonder if I was ever built for a parson."

" You needn't ; you make an excellent vicar, though it seems impertinent of me to tell you so."

" On the contrary, it's very good of you to say so."

" It's not what I say ; it's what everyone says."

" Then it's very good of everyone—but I have still my doubts. Look at Pattison ; there's your ideal parson—what a vicar he'd make ! "

" I'd rather have you."

" Perhaps you would ; but I am not sure——"

There seemed to be a significance in the way in which he stopped in the middle of the sentence which caused the girl to avert her face. There was an expression on his face which made it appear more boyish still. He went on.

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" You see it's this way ; nowadays a parson ought to take up some definite line. He ought to be a teetotaller or an anti-smoker, or a vegetarian, or a Socialist, or a High Churchman, something up-to-date. Now Pattison's all these things, and I'm not one of them."

" You're none the worse on that account."

" Not as a man, but as a parson I think I am. I'm too fond of the things of this world ; of life—why, to me, living is in itself a joy."

" So it ought to be."

" Pattison doesn't think so. You should have heard him talking, only last night, about the mystic sufferings of the saints and martyrs ; how we ought to nail ourselves to the crosses which they fashioned for us, that, like them, we might be an example to the world. Now I never could do that ; there's nothing of the saint and martyr about me."

Dropping his stick, and rising to his feet, Mr. Menzies began to walk about the dell.

" Do you know that I often feel that I'd like to own a race-horse ? One, if not two. Now, a parson has no right to harbour a feeling of that sort."

" It is perhaps a little unusual."

" Pattison would want to unfrock me if he knew. Then, again, I sometimes think what fun it would be to put, say, £200 in my pocket, and go to Monte Carlo, and have—you know—a little flutter ; it's not a word I ought to use, but I've heard other people use it, and it expresses just what I mean. Isn't that monstrous ?—that a vicar of a parish should want to gamble ? I

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believe that if Pattison knew he'd report me to the bishop."

Miss Grahame said nothing. As, looking down, she twisted the grasses with her fingers, it seemed to her that there was a humorous side to the vicar's confessions of which he was unconscious.

"The truth is, the living was my father's; he thought it too good a thing to go out of the family; put me into the Church; made me his curate, and, in due time, I succeeded. He was not a poor man, for a parson; what he had was divided between Laura and me. Then an uncle died who had invented a new sort of glue, and who left me quite a quantity of money; so that now I am not a poor man, judged by any standard. To a man of my temperament that makes my position so difficult. If I had to live on what the living produces, having to cut my coat according to the cloth might make of me a model parson in time; narrow means might have the effect on me of a hair shirt. But it does seem to me, with my tastes, to be almost a tragedy that, because I am a parson, I should not be able to take advantage of the ample means I actually have."

The Rev. Peter Menzies was getting so warm that he began to pound the open palm of his left hand with his clenched right fist.

"You say, why don't you devote your money to some deserving object, or give it to some great charity. If I were a Socialist I might; as it is, I doubt if any charity that ever was does good to the extent of a shilling in every subscribed pound. You say that's

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something ! Maybe. But, unfortunately, I'm so constituted that the idea of throwing away at least ninety per cent. of my money is not a proposition which commends itself to me. Pattison could do it, and be happy ; any model parson could—but I'm not a model parson."

As if he had had enough of pounding himself, thrusting his hands into his jacket pockets he returned to striding to and fro.

"Talking of devoting my money to a deserving object ; I don't say it in a boastful spirit, but I do believe I am as deserving an object as most of the men I come across, or women either. I've been spending money on what I don't like all my life ; I should like to spend some on what I do like—some of my own money. I should be almost willing to make a bargain—if I can spend ten shillings of each of my sovereigns on what I do like I'll give the other ten shillings to any charity which an authority on charities, say Pattison, likes to name. But I can't even make that bargain ; my cloth forbids. I'm passionately fond of yachting ; I never have done any, but I feel sure I should be. I should like to spend some of my money in building myself a yacht ; I should like to go cruising about in it during a considerable portion of the year, but how's a vicar to do his duty to his parish if he spends an appreciable part of his time on his yacht ? You see how it is with me ? "

"I think I do ; and I think I can honestly say that you have my sympathy."

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"I knew I should have ; I was sure of it ; you're the only woman I ever met who I felt could sympathise with me. The average woman's idea of what a parson ought to be makes me feel that either she's a perfect fool or that I'm the meanest man alive. And that's one of the reasons why I came to look for you in what I've heard you say was your favourite spot in the woods. I wanted to make it clear to you what manner of man I am before telling you what a favour, and honour, you will do me, and how happy you will make me, if you will be my wife."

The climax was sudden. For some minutes she had had a vague notion that he might be approaching a subject of which she had never dreamed in connection with him ; but he had got to it so suddenly that when he stopped she could only stare at him in startled wonder. He presently made it plain that he himself was conscious that his methods were a trifle abrupt.

"Of course I know that that isn't how I ought to have put it. I warned you that some of the things I had to say to you might with advantage be differently expressed, and that's one of them. I suppose that from the conventional point of view I ought to have led up to the subject by telling you that I love you, but I'm not sure that that is how I see it. I take it for granted that you know me well enough to be aware that I shouldn't ask you to be my wife unless I wanted you very badly. I do ; I want you to be my wife on every account—badly. So badly that I've a sort of conviction that if you'll consent to be my wife my life will turn

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out to be a success after all ; while if you won't consent I'm afraid to think of how it may turn out—I'm positively afraid."

She now, having collected some of the senses which he had scattered, was sitting up and staring at him with eyes in which, as thoughts chased each other through her head, lights and shadows seemed to go in a fashion she had no notion of.

" That's absurd."

" Conceded ; yet it's true."

" What can you possibly see in me that you should want me to be your wife ? "

He drew a long breath.

" If I were to start telling you all I do see in you I should want more words than are in my dictionary, and more breath than I'm endowed with."

" Then you can't know anything at all about me."

" I've known you for two years ; unbroken years. I've watched you ; listened to you ; heard of you ; until, if I weren't a parson, I'd wager a trifle that I know you as well as a man may know a woman who is not his wife."

" Then how can you suppose that I am fitted to be—a vicar's wife ? "

Suddenly he plumped down, cross-legged, on the broken ground, within a few feet of where she sat.

" That's the point, the thing which has yet to be learnt. I'll tell you what I propose to do when we are married."

" *When* we are married."

There was such an accent on her "*when!*"

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“Exactly ; I said ‘when we are married.’”

“Yes ; but you spoke of it as if it were a probable event—don’t.”

He put up his hands to smooth his hair.

“Good. Then I’ll try not to. I’ll put it this way—I’ll tell you what I propose we should do if we are married. I propose that you should commence by finding out, from actual experience, if you are really suited to be a vicar’s wife ; it’s a moot point, which only actual experience can decide. If you do turn out to be suited to be a vicar’s wife, I’ve no doubt whatever that you’ll turn me out a model parson.”

“I turn you out a model parson ? What nonsense are you talking ?”

“I’m talking sense. Your becoming my wife will have the result of bringing out the best that is in me. You know how they treat ore ? They associate it with something which induces the worthless dross to take itself off, leaving the true metal behind. That’s the effect your becoming my wife will have on me—I’ll be refined. Suppose, on the other hand, you find that you are not suited to be a vicar’s wife. Very well ! I’ve just been trying to tell you that I’m by no means sure that I’m suited to be a vicar. Nothing could be simpler. We’ll resign, both of us ; the living’s mine, in my gift—I’ll present Pattison—now there will be your model vicar. If he doesn’t turn the parish upside down inside twelve months, as it seems a modern up-to-date parson ought to do, I’m a Dutchman. Either way nothing could be better. With your help I shall have arrived

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at a clear understanding of where I am ; without your help, as I've said, I don't know where I shall arrive—I'm afraid to think of it."

"Your remarks are so extraordinary that I hardly know how to characterise them. Are you aware that I'm literally penniless—that my uncle left me nothing ?"

"I've heard that the will by which he left you practically everything has not been found, and I hope it won't be."

"That's very kind of you."

"I hope it for two reasons. The first is a selfish one—I want you, and you alone. I don't want money bags ; I've enough for both of us. Then I'm old-fashioned ; that's one reason why I can't be an up-to-date parson. I'm given to understand that Mr. Culver made his money in ways which were more than dubious. We don't want ill-gotten gold, you and I ; that's the sort of stuff that is best given to charities."

"That remark shows that you have some dim appreciation of the fact that I come of a thoroughly bad stock."

"John Culver wasn't your father, and he wasn't your mother either. Don't tell me that your father and mother weren't of the salt of the earth, or they wouldn't have had such a daughter."

"My father was certainly an honest man, and my mother——" Something came into her eyes which softened them. "I wish you had known my mother."

"I wish I had."

"They were like sweethearts, till my father died ; then my mother couldn't live without him, even for my

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sake. But my father didn't make any money, or I shouldn't be here."

"Then I'm glad he didn't. Honest men don't make money—only thieves. Believing that, how can I stand in the pulpit and pretend that real religion pays, when I know it doesn't? To that extent I am a Socialist."

"Think of the cloud which is at the present moment hovering over Timberham ; of the scandal which will attach to you if you marry a girl coming from such a house—one who in the witness-box has had things dragged out of her which have made her name a by-word ; who will almost certainly have to go there again and—and be shamed still more."

"If she does have to go into the witness-box again, I hope she'll go there as my wife. It is, in great measure, that hope which has brought me here this afternoon."

Miss Grahame was silent. She contemplated the Rev. Peter Menzies as if she were appraising him on some standard of her own. When she spoke again it was to ask a question.

"Do you know that they have found Walter Palgrave, who is an acquaintance of mine, guilty of—you know what?"

"I was present in the court when the verdict was given ; I came straight from there to you, feeling that this may be a time in which you are almost as much in need as I am."

Her glance fell ; she was more moved by his words

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and manner than she would have cared to own. He was not a romantic looking person ; he had even a curiously unromantic trick of translating his thoughts into commonplace words ; yet he inspired her with a comfortable consciousness that, if she chose, she would find in him a very true friend in time of trouble. An odd problem flitted across her mind. She loved the one man, and always would ; but might she not be happy with this other man, whom she only liked ? The solution to all her troubles might lie there. The Rev. Peter's wife, whether he continued "Reverend" or not, could hardly be a miserable woman. She spoke more gently than she had done hitherto.

"I am very much obliged to you, Mr. Menzies, for the offer you have made me, and flattered, and even honoured. You and I have been such good friends that it—it is rather sweet to have this fresh token of your friendship, but—"

He stopped her.

"I know what you are going to say; don't say it. I have a better idea of how matters really stand with you than you perhaps imagine. I did not come here this afternoon expecting that you would consent to be my wife, I had no such delightful anticipation. I am only too well aware of my own disqualifications."

"Please do not say such silly things."

He went on apparently heedless of the words she murmured as she still looked down.

"I came, rather, to prepare your mind—as it were, to clear the ground. I wanted to be quite plain with

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you, so that you might at least understand me. Just think over what I've said. I know that I'm not good looking ; that I'm stupid, awkward, gauche ; that I've nothing to commend me to the most beautiful, most graceful, most charming, wittiest, cleverest, tenderest, bravest girl in the world."

" Is that string of epithets meant to apply to me ? "

" It is ; it represents the honest and well considered opinion which I have formed after two years' acquaintance with Miss Elsie Grahame, and nothing which you or anyone else can say will cause me to subtract from it one jot or tittle. Whatever the future may have in store for me, one flattering unction I may lay to my soul, that I've at least had the happiness to know a woman who, to my thinking, combined in her own dear person all that a woman ought to be. Note my words ; you'll find that they represent less than half of what I'll feel on that same subject in twenty years' time—if I weren't a parson I'd bet on it."

He put on his hat and picked up his stick.

" I've had my say. When you've an odd moment to spare, put on your thinking cap and consider my words. One day I'll ask you for your decision. In the meanwhile, should you stand in need of any of those many services which one friend may render to another, I entreat you not to forget that you have a friend who'll be made a very happy man if you'll suffer him to render them ; without expectation of fee or recompense."

Without any attempt at a formal adieu he left her sitting in the dell.

CHAPTER X

THE WOMAN WHO WORKED

THAT was the second she had sent away ; two wooers in a single afternoon. What a difference between the men and their methods ! The one had moved her to the very depths of her being. She could not think of him without a tremor, which was part rapture, part pain. The other ? He had roused in her a sufficiently quaint suspicion that he might not be at all an uncomfortable person for a woman to go through life with—a woman, that is, whose ideal was not too high up among the stars. Perhaps it were wisdom to prefer him to the other. If one's ecstasies were fewer, one's peace of mind might be more enduring.

Quite an appreciable space of time passed before the lady's thoughts strayed from her strongly contrasted lovers to the hollow in the tree. It was with a sense of shock that she realised how much the Rev. Peter Menzies had occupied her mind ; she had not supposed that he could have caused her to become so completely oblivious of her astonishing discovery. As it came back to her she rose to her knees with a start ; the expression almost of amusement which had been upon her features vanished in a flash. The strained look returned to her

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eyes ; that suggestion they had lately conveyed that she was in continual expectation of she herself knew scarcely what. Standing up, she glanced about her, listening. Mr. Menzies' footsteps had died away—she was alone again, and all was still. It was only when she was convinced of this that she gave her attention again to the tree, parting the foliage, as before, with her hands, and peering into the hollow beyond. She took out the envelope which she had had in her hand when she had been startled by the sound of the vicar's approaching footsteps. Furtively, as if she were not only ashamed of what she was doing, but as if she were afraid that, at any moment, she might be interrupted, she deciphered what was scrawled upon it. Although it occupied nearly half the length of the envelope, there were only two words—and they short ones.

“ My Will.”

It was a statement, in old John Culver's hieroglyphical handwriting, of what the envelope contained. His will ? The flap was unfastened. It was a large envelope, but it was well filled. She could see, when she raised the flap, that the document within was a bulky one. Possibly, nay, probably, it was the will to which Mr. Lazarus had referred, which had been drawn up by Messrs. Meerham and Kirby ; which Mr. Culver was presumed to have had in safe keeping at Timberham, but which, up to that moment, had not been found—the will which gave Clare Harmar only a pittance—the will which Peter Menzies had hoped

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would not be found. If that were so, then, instead of being penniless, she was practically a millionaire ; certainly the possessor of more money than she would ever know what to do with—the inheritor of John Culver's ill-gotten gains.

What had Mr. Lazarus said would happen to a person who destroyed a will ? What did it matter to her what happened ? If she destroyed that will, who would be the wiser ? Who would ever know what she had done ?

Two considerations kept her from tearing up the envelope and its contents there and then. In the first place, it might be as well to make sure what it was she was destroying ; to be quite clear what the envelope really did contain. It might be awkward if, too late, she were to discover that it was not that will she had made an end of. From every point of view she would have made bad worse instead of better. Then, in the second place, before she took it for granted that what she did would never become known, it might be just as well to have some idea of how the envelope came to be where it was. It was conceivable that it had been put in such a very unlikely spot by some person with deliberate intent. In that case, if she were to make away with it, it would be missed and she might be suspected. If she were questioned it might not be nice for her.

How did the envelope get into what she had always considered to be her tree ? A clue to the riddle might be found if she were to examine the other papers which

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had got there also. Slipping the envelope into her blouse, she returned to the hollow. She took out bundle after bundle of parchments, old and new, all tied round with pink tape, bearing, in crabbed, legal handwritings, endorsements which, from the hasty glance she gave them, conveyed to her no meaning at all. She surmised that they might be title deeds of some estate or estates. It was only when she got to another envelope, which was under everything else, that it dawned upon her what the whole thing might mean. This envelope, like the one she had between the buttons of her blouse, was big and bulky ; bigger and bulkier than that one. Like it, also, something was scrawled across it in her uncle's handwriting.

“Walter Palgrave.—Various.”

It was when she had made out those three words that she began, dimly, to understand. While she was trying to dissolve the mental mists through which she saw the answer to the puzzle vaguely, as in a haze, a voice addressed her from just behind her back.

“Excuse me, but might I ask what you happen to be up to there ?”

Had the voice been that of some spectral visitant it could hardly have taken her more by surprise. Not a sound had disturbed the silence, yet when she turned, there at the bottom of the slope, within a foot or two of where she herself was standing, was an individual who certainly did not look like one who had dropped

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from the skies. In the shock of her amazement the papers with which her arms were filled went tumbling on to the ground. Before the last of them had reached the earth the stranger had darted at them as some wild creature might spring at its prey.

"Thank you—unless I'm wrong, that little lot is just what I've come here to get."

Ere Miss Grahame had fully realised what was happening, the woman—the stranger was a woman—was cramming the various packages into a leather bag which she had opened before her on the grass. Recovering herself with an effort, she made a not unnecessary inquiry into the meaning of the other's proceedings.

"Who are you? And what are you doing with those papers?"

Instead of answering, the woman put a question on her own account.

"Would you mind looking to see if there's anything else inside that tree? You're taller than I am; it's a bit beyond my reach."

What seemed to her to be the impudence of the request moved Miss Grahame to action. Stooping, with one hand she caught hold of the stranger's bag and with the other of such of the papers as had not yet gone into it.

"Before I do anything of the kind you'll be so good as to explain your presence here, and what right you have to touch these papers."

So far from seeming embarrassed, the stranger looked up at her with a grin.

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"At any rate, I'll tell you who you are—you're Elsie Grahame."

Miss Grahame looked wonderingly at the woman, who was apparently familiar enough with her appearance. As she looked she became conscious of a feeling that this was not the first time she had seen the stranger.

"I believe I have seen you somewhere before, but I don't remember where."

"I'll tell you; it was at the inquest."

Elsie echoed the other's words with a vague feeling of misgiving.

"At the inquest?"

"Don't you remember when they were cross-examining you, and asking a lot of questions which you didn't want to answer about what you did and you didn't know about Walter Palgrave, that you looked round and caught my eye, and that I winked at you? You looked at me two or three times again after that, as if you couldn't make me out—which wasn't surprising, though all I meant was to give you a bit of comfort, because you did look so worried."

The incident came back to Elsie before the other had finished speaking. She had wondered who the woman was, and what she had meant by her familiarity; she wondered still more now that she saw her there in the dell.

"I do recollect now that you mention it; but isn't there some alteration in your appearance?"

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The grin expanded, disclosing a lovely set of small white, even teeth.

"Ever heard of a transformation? I'm better known than you perhaps think. It wouldn't have suited me to advertise just then, so I wore a brown transformation over this scarlet thatch. Wonderful what a difference a thing like that, if it's well done, does make in a girl."

It certainly had effected a striking change in her appearance—Elsie's memory had become quite clear. That girl had had dark brown hair; this one's locks were flaming red, yet a close inspection convinced her that the two girls were one and the same.

"I see now what has happened; but I'm still in the dark as to who you are, or what you were doing in the court; and still more what you are doing here treating those papers as if they were your own."

The stranger seemed to hesitate; then to arrive at a sudden resolution.

"When I tell you that maybe one of these days I shall be Walter Palgrave's wife, perhaps you'll begin to get out of the dark."

That Miss Grahame looked the surprise and incredulity she felt the other's words made plain.

"No wonder you look as if you didn't believe me; I don't mind, it doesn't hurt me. Of course I know quite well that I don't belong to the class you do, and still less to the class he does—the Palgraves are one of the best families in the land. But if you think that that sort of thing makes any difference to a man where a

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woman's concerned that's all you do know. Walter Palgrave cares for me as much as he ever cared for any girl, or ever will ; I don't want to be told it ; I know. As for me, there's nothing I care for in the world but him, and he knows that. There's nothing I wouldn't do for him if he asked me—mind you, nothing ! and he knows that too. Now do you see how it is ? "

" I'm beginning to have a glimmer of light."

" I thought you would. Now I'll tell you who I am. I'm Sallie Scarlett ; that's who I am. Ever heard of me ? "

Elsie shook her head.

" Sure ? You think."

" I'm not conscious of ever having heard of you."

Miss Scarlett seemed disappointed, as if Elsie's ignorance was rather a blow.

" Perhaps you don't go much to the halls ? "

" What halls ? "

" What halls ? Why, the music halls, of course. The idea of your asking what halls ! All of them—or any of 'em."

" I'm afraid that my opportunities in that direction have been few and far between."

There seemed to be something in Elsie's words or manner which Miss Scarlett resented.

" I don't know if that means that you think yourself above them, because, if so, let me tell you that the halls are becoming more and more aristocratic every year, and it won't be very long before the King and the

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Royal Family go to them as regularly as to the Italian Opera, to say nothing of the theatres."

"I assure you that my words were not meant to convey disparagement ; I simply made confession of my ignorance."

Although Elsie's tone could hardly have been more charged with candour, Miss Scarlett still looked as though she doubted.

"The way you talk is a bit above my head, as perhaps is your intention. Anyhow, if you did know anything about the halls you'd have heard of Sallie Scarlett. I used to be billed as 'The Red-Headed Queen of Song and Dance' ; but I've put a stop to that. I make it a clause in my contracts that I'm to be announced as 'Sallie Scarlett,' and 'Sallie Scarlett' only. Sallie Scarlett means quite enough to anyone who's seen me once."

Again the speaker grinned. Elsie, as she regarded the vividly radiant mass of the lady's hair, inwardly agreed with her that it did.

"I was doing the first turn at the Brighton Hippodrome when Walter Palgrave saw me first ; one song, half a dozen steps, and the curtain, all inside five minutes. I tell you that it's not easy, under those circs., for anyone to make a hit ; you never get half a chance to show what you can do ; yet he fell in love with me in those first five minutes. Straight !—he's told me so often—and he's never fallen out since. Since that night he introduced himself to me at the Brighton Hippodrome no girl ever had a better pal than he has been to me

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—though, mind you, since then, I've gone up and he's gone down. My word ! if you come to think of it, how we have changed places."

She paused for a few seconds, as if to consider the changes which time had wrought.

"In those days he'd money to burn, and didn't he burn it ! He thought no more of a fiver than I did of fivepence ; nor as much. I was averaging about two pounds a week when I was at work, but as I was as often out as in I don't suppose it came to much more than fifty pounds a year—but I lived on it. I always have lived on what I earned, and on nothing else. Now —well—I don't want to boast, and I don't want to give away my private business either, but I wouldn't take six thousand pounds for my contracts during the next three years : and, after that, we'll see. I'm not in my prime yet ; I'm improving all the while ; before I've done I mean to knock 'em—you see."

This time Miss Scarlett paused with the apparent intention of giving Elsie an opportunity to appreciate her future prospects.

"It's very different with Walter Palgrave. Not only has he gone down, but it looks very much as if he was going down still lower. Now you see what I meant when I said that maybe one day I'll be his wife. When he had got the pieces of course it wasn't likely, but now I've got 'em the situation's altered. I shan't be able to keep him as he's been used to keep himself, and I don't suppose I ever shall ; but that won't hurt him—he's done himself too well. But I shall be able to keep him

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in comfort, and, mind you, as a gentleman ought to live. So now perhaps you see why I'm after these."

Although she did not specifically say so, she apparently alluded to the bundles of papers she had been cramming into her bag.

"I'm afraid I don't."

Miss Scarlett dropped her voice.

"They're his title deeds, and bills, and things, which he went off with that night."

The light was becoming clearer—all along Miss Grahame had had a vague perception of how matters really stood.

"But how did they get into my tree?"

"It seems that, in a way, you put him on to that."

"I did?"

"He's often spoken to me about you; he's not everybody's money—there's no need for anyone to tell me that—but it's not often that he's out when he says there's good stuff in a girl, and he thinks no end of you. So—I'll just tell you how it was. It seems that one day he came with you into the woods, and you showed him the tree, and told him all about it."

Miss Grahame knit her brow, as if in perplexity.

"I have some dim recollection of something of the kind; it must have been soon after I came to England; that's a long time ago."

"Perhaps; but it stuck in his head; you never can tell what will and what won't stick in people's heads; it seems that stuck in his. That night he was sprung, or he'd never have done a bunk; there wouldn't have

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been half the fuss ; they wouldn't have pitched on him any more than on anyone else if he'd stayed in the house and gone back to bed like the others did."

Elsie glanced apprehensively round.

"Please don't enter into particulars, I'd rather you didn't."

"Right-o." Miss Scarlett winked. "I'm on ; we don't any of us want to know more than we need. I'll just tell you about the tree. As you know, he went off in his dinner clothes, and his arms full of papers, being just drunk enough to be silly. Somehow he found his way to this place ; it was moonlight, and he says he knew it directly he got here, though it seems a queer tale to me. It had dawned upon him by that time that he couldn't go carting the papers about all over the country ; when he saw where he was, suddenly he thought of the tree, according to him. So he shoves them into the hollow you'd shown him—as much, he says, for the lark as for anything else. He's got his own idea of larks."

Miss Scarlett's tone was grim. Miss Grahame had personal knowledge of how true her statement was.

"It happened I was putting in a week at a small hall not very far from here, and I was stopping with a friend who lives a little way out of the town—a farmhouse it is. He knew all about it. When he'd shoved the things into the tree he found his way to where I was stopping. Of course he didn't know which my room was, but he chucked some gravel at one of the windows on the off chance that it might be mine, and

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luckily for him it was. You can fancy what my feelings were when I was woke out of sleep with a jump, and, hearing something hit the window, looked out and saw him down below, in his dinner-clothes, somewhere about five o'clock in the morning. I'd been expecting for some time that he would get himself into trouble before very long, and pretty soon I learnt he'd got there. However, I made him snug, and I've managed to keep him snug ever since—as you don't want to know too much, that's all you need know."

This observation was accompanied by a grin which hinted that she might have made some curious additions to Elsie's stock of knowledge had she chosen.

"Ever since I've found out what the trouble really was he'd got himself into I've had a time, I tell you."

"But—has he told you everything?"

There was a significance in the question which the other was quick to grasp. Again she winked—it seemed to be a favourite trick of hers.

"My dear—excuse me calling you my dear, but you know what I mean—don't let us ask each other too many questions ; as I said just now, we don't either of us want to know too much. Have you heard that that coroner's lot have brought it in against him ?"

Elsie intimated that she had ; she wondered, with a little shiver, how often she was to be informed of the fact.

"I hear that there's talk of a reward being offered ; so it looks as if things were going to be lively. I thought that before the country got too hot I'd do what

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he wanted me, and get the things out of his precious tree. I don't mind owning that I half believed he'd been telling the tale about that tree till I saw you just now standing up there with your arms full of papers. Then I knew that he couldn't have been so drunk as I thought, and I understood that you'd probably come upon them unexpected."

"You were quite right, I had."

"Now you see how matters really stand. None of these papers are yours?"

"So far as I'm aware, not one of them."

"Then, that being so, you'll have no objection to my taking them to him?"

Elsie making no reply, Miss Scarlett, apparently taking her silence to imply consent, continued to cram the remaining papers into her leather bag. Just as she had got the last one in, and was about to close it, she looked round with a start.

"What's that?"

All at once a man's head appeared over the top of a branch of tall bracken which was on one side of the dell. He addressed them in a tone which, although it did not rise above a whisper, yet had a curiously penetrating power.

"Pardon me, ladies, but if you'll take my tip, and don't want to be asked any awkward questions, you'll get under cover as fast as ever you can. There are a couple of coppers coming through the wood, who are up to no good, you may be sure, and they're right on us."

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The head vanished as suddenly as it had appeared ; where its owner had taken himself off to, from where they were, it was not easy to determine. Miss Scarlett looked at Elsie with startled eyes.

"Coppers ?—coming through the wood ?" She paused to listen. Heavy footsteps were distinctly audible. "Here they are. If they find me with this bag——"

The sentence was left unfinished. Elsie, taking her by the wrist, drew her quickly up the slope, to the other side of the tree. She spoke in a whisper.

"Here's a place out of which I think they once took gravel ; it's shallow, but now that the bracken's out all round the edge it's deep enough to hide us if we stoop down low."

CHAPTER XI

AN OVERHEARD CONVERSATION

WHAT Miss Grahame had said proved to be correct. The fringe of bracken served as so excellent a screen that when the two girls crouched down they were completely hidden. So long as they kept still anyone might pass close to them and not guess that they were there. They had not, however, gone to cover a moment too soon. Scarcely had they done so when two persons came tramping down into the dell with whose identity they were both of them familiar. One of them was Inspector Felkin, and the other was the village constable, George Wilkins. It was the latter who spoke first.

"This was where I found it ; just about where I am standing ; though it might have been a mite closer to that old oak." •

Mr. Wilkins was standing where Miss Scarlett had just been kneeling. The inspector put to him a question.

"You are sure that it's his ?"

"There are his initials on it—W. P. And I showed it to Maggie Hunt, who's one of the housemaids, and she recognised it as his matchbox. She says she saw it in his hand that very day—he passed it to

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Mr. Harmar for him to get a light with as she was helping Tyrrell to set out the tea."

"Then your theory is that he came through the woods and made a stop here—what for?"

"To light a cigar. There was the matchbox about where I'm standing, and close by it was a half-burned match. You've got it in the box."

"What did he do with the papers? He must have had his arms full of them."

"I expect he put them down while he was lighting up. Perhaps it was getting them together again made him overlook his matchbox."

"He must be a pretty cool card to have stopped here to light a cigar after what he'd just been doing. Then where did he go?"

"Up that bank, along that footpath to the left, and through that belt of firs you see in the distance. Then he either got tired, or doubtful about his way, or something, because he sat on the fence beyond and finished his cigar. I found what was left of it in the ditch on the other side, and I gave it to you."

"And then?"

"He went across the sixteen-acre field and through Joe Radford's farm.

"How do you know that?"

"Radford left eight cows out in his bottom meadow. He shut the gate which opens into the road and made it fast with a stake. In the morning the cows were out in the road, the gate was open, and the stake was gone. Mr. Palgrave, he opened

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the gate and took the stake with him ; though if he left it open on purpose I can't say. He might more easily have got over it, but he didn't."

"Which way did he take afterwards ?"

"Somewhere about two miles along the road he turned on to the downs towards Peterham."

"Who told you that ?"

"There was a large flock of sheep on the downs that night ; the shepherd was sleeping in his hut with the door open. About three o'clock in the morning he was woken by something, but he couldn't think what. When he got outside he couldn't stop to find out what had woken him, because the dogs were barking, and the sheep were tearing off in all directions as if they'd gone mad. When he'd herded them again, and got back, he found a large hedge-stake, which he was sure hadn't been there over-night, lying close to his hut. Mr. Palgrave, for the fun of it, threw that stake at the hut as he went past—it was the noise it made which woke the shepherd and frightened the sheep. I showed it to Joe Radford ; he said he fastened his gate, which he found open, with one just like it."

"Have you tracked Walter Palgrave any further ?"

"Not at present I haven't, but I shouldn't be surprised if I did before very long."

The Inspector regarded his subordinate with what seemed to be a mixture of feelings.

"You must be a bloodhound, you must. Do you walk along with your nose to the ground ?"

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"I can't say that I do, but I was brought up in these parts; and before I joined the force I was three years under-keeper in these woods, so I got into the habit of noticing things."

"You seem to. What else have you what you call 'noticed'? For instance, have ~~you~~ noticed that there's anyone up at the house who perhaps knows better where Walter Palgrave went to that night than you do?"

Thrusting his thumbs into his belt, Mr. Wilkins assumed what he perhaps meant to be a judicial air.

"I shouldn't be surprised if there was."

"Who? Anyone in particular?"

"The two young ladies; especially Miss Grahame."

"What makes you think Miss Grahame knows more than anybody else?"

"Maggie Hunt, whose name I just now mentioned, she's been noticing things, and from what she's told me I've formed my own conclusions."

"Oh you have, have you? Then just you show me the place where you found the rest of that cigar, and as we go along perhaps you'll tell me what are the conclusions you have formed."

The two men strode together up the bank, and passed out of sight, and, presently, out of sound.

Some time elapsed before the pair in hiding ventured to move. Then, very gingerly, inch by inch, Miss Scarlett raised her head and looked around. She spoke in a sepulchral whisper.

"They have gone."

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Miss Grahame appeared at her side. Without attempting to move from where they were they spoke together in whispers, Miss Scarlett beginning with a question.

"They're a nice couple, they are. Did you hear what they said?"

"Every word."

"He's a beauty, that Wilkins is. I've heard about him before. He has the reputation in the village of being as sharp as a razor."

"He seems to be a dangerous man."

"Dangerous? I should think so. So he found his matchbox; and his match; and his cigar; and the gate he left open; and the stick he threw at the shepherd's hut. I wonder if Palgrave did do what he said he did? I haven't much faith in policemen in a general way; but if he did, what's the odds that Wilkins won't end up by finding out where he got to after all? That'll be nice for all of us if he does. What makes him think that you know more about where Walter Palgrave is than anybody else?"

"I don't know."

"Sure?"

"I can only suppose that Maggie's been telling him things, but I've no notion what."

"I should keep an eye on Miss Maggie Hunt if I were you. She seems to have been noticing you a good deal; it's about time you noticed her."

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Miss Grahame diverted the conversation into a slightly different channel.

"Who was the man who warned us that they were coming? Where did he come from? And which way did he go? Or do you think that he's still there?"

The two girls stared across the hollow at the brake of fern.

"That's what I've been wondering all the while. Don't you know who he was?"

"I never saw him in my life before."

"I'll tell you one thing; come closer—I don't want even the leaves to hear. He knows more about the inside of a prison than he ought to; I should say he hadn't long been out of one."

"What makes you think so?"

"If jail wasn't written large all over him I can't read. It was on his face; in his eyes. Did you not notice how short his hair was? More than anything it was in the way he whispered. They're not allowed to talk in there; so I'm told that the old hands get a knack of speaking without moving their lips, in a whisper the sound of which only reaches the man it's meant to. I thought of that when he was whispering to us. Did you notice how he did it? No one could have heard but us."

"I'm afraid I didn't. I'm wondering how long he had been there, watching and listening. I hope he didn't see you put those papers in your bag, or where they came from."

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"You can't hope it more sincerely than I do. I'm beginning to wish that I'd left this sort of thing alone ; it really isn't in my line at all. Anyhow, it's no good my stopping here any longer. I tell you what, I've half a mind to leave this bag with you."

"Don't, please ! He asked you to get those papers ; I expect he wants them—you'll only increase the danger by leaving them here."

"It's all very well for you to talk ; but what price me if they're found in my possession ? What sort of explanation am I going to give ? I've got a feeling about Mr. Wilkins that he'd know what was inside the bag if he only saw the outside. But, as you say, he did ask me to get 'em ; and I know he wants them, though what for beats me. He'll never dare to do anything with them. Still, I never have shirked yet, and I'm not going to start now—nothing venture nothing win. So I'll take myself off, with the bag ; you let me have a bit of a lead before you start to go. So long ! If you receive a communication signed with my initials you'll know who it's from."

With the leather bag in her hand Miss Scarlett moved swiftly and lightly off among the trees, in the opposite direction to that taken by Inspector Felkin and Police-Constable Wilkins.

CHAPTER XII

LIONEL FITZHERBERT, ESQ.

AND for the third time Elsie Grahame was left alone—that is, so far as any visible companion was concerned. Her eyes remained fixed on the brake of bracken over the top of which the man's head had so unexpectedly appeared. Miss Scarlett's departure had been noiseless. Elsie strained her ears to catch a sound. All was still. Even the birds were silent. Only now and then there was a faint sighing, as of the breeze among the trees. Her nervous system had undergone a greater strain than she would have cared to admit. Events of the most unlooked-for kind had crowded on each other so quickly that she was reduced to a condition in which she was almost fearful of what might happen next. Who was the man who had warned them? What had he been doing there? How had he come—noiselessly, unperceived? How long had he been there? Had he gone? Or was he yet in the bracken?

The possibility that this might be so; that, himself invisible, he might be playing the spy on her, watching her every movement, was more than she could endure. The envelope, endorsed with the

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significant two words, "My Will," was still in her possession. She had not spoken of it herself. If Miss Scarlett had observed it—it was sufficiently prominent, a good half was sticking out between the buttons of her blouse—she had shown no curiosity as to what it might be. Now Elsie placed the entire envelope within her blouse, making sure that none of it was visible from without. Then quitting what had been her hiding-place, she walked across the dell towards the bracken. As she drew near the great fan-like leaves swayed violently to and fro, disturbed by someone's sudden movement. Running up the bank she gained the top just in time to see a man straighten his figure as, reaching the open, he dashed into a patch of hawthorns, which grew so close they seemed to swallow him up. She shouted to him.

"Stop!—I want to speak to you!—Tell me who you are!"

Even to herself it sounded rather like the petulant cry of a child. Her appeal went unanswered. The runaway had vanished from sight, without her even getting a clear view of him as he went. Who was he that he had continued to spy upon her in so unpleasant a fashion? Why, at her approach, had he so precipitately fled? Her impulse was to follow—to hunt him down. Circumstanced as she was mystery was the thing she dreaded most. A second's reflection showed her how absurd, on her part, such an attempt would be. She might chase him for hours without bringing him to bay, if she ever succeeded in

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bringing him to bay at all. It would be better, and more dignified, to treat him with contempt.

She resolved to return home. Conscious that her hair had caught in the fronds of the bracken, as she lay in hiding, she put up her hands to smooth her dishevelled tresses. She presented a very enticing picture as she stood there amid the wealth of greenery , a slight flush on her usually pale cheeks, and something in her eyes which made them shine like stars. She turned to go, and had not gone far, with every sense keenly on the alert,'when she became aware that she was being followed. Instead of hunting she was being hunted. Suddenly stopping, she swung round, just in time to see a figure spring behind a tree upon her left. She had only had the merest glimpse, but she was sure, all the same, that it was the figure of a man. The tree was perhaps a hundred yards from where she was ; the mere distance made pursuit obviously futile. If he chose to keep her at arm's length he could, at least for an indefinite period. Why he was shadowing her and refusing to come out into the open she could not think. The bare knowledge that she was being subjected to such treatment, for unknown reasons, by an unknown man, who, according to her latest acquaintance, knew more of jail than he ought to, made her conscious of uncomfortable sensations.

After momentary hesitation she started again ; not, this time, heading straight for home, but branching off on a side path, to see if she would still

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be followed. She had not gone twenty yards before she was aware that the chase had been renewed. Although she had heard nothing, and had not looked round, something told her that the man behind had quickened his steps and drawn much closer. The path led to where the trees were thickest. The idea that it might be his intention to make himself known to her in the most secluded part of the wood did not commend itself to her at all. Constitutionally fearless, as a rule she would have laughed to scorn a suggestion that she could be afraid of any man, under any conditions, anywhere. Then, for some reason, the notion that the unknown pursuer might force himself upon her at some moment, and in some spot which would be of his choosing, not hers, filled her with sudden panic, with such sudden panic, indeed, that almost before she realised what she was doing she deserted the path, and dashed off at a run toward Timberham, as if her one object was to reach it by the shortest cut.

She had not, however, run very many steps before it was borne in on her that her behaviour was as undignified as it was unwise. There was no semblance of a path. She would not only, if she persisted in going straight on, have to make the best of her way through bracken which was, in places, more than six feet high, but also through a thick undergrowth of all sorts and kinds. If she succeeded in getting through she would present an undesirable spectacle when she reached the other side. Common sense coming to

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her aid, regaining some remnants of her presence of mind, stopping as suddenly as she had started, she turned to confront her pursuer.

This time, instead of attempting concealment, he stood watching her, in apparent enjoyment of the awkward position into which she had managed to get herself. Desisting, for the moment, from the chase, he remained on the path which she had just quitted, rubbing his hands over each other, with an expression of amusement on his unprepossessing visage which, when she saw it, she resented. He addressed her in the curiously low tone of voice in which he had warned the two girls of the approaching police, which, although it scarcely rose above a whisper, had such a singularly penetrating power.

"Rather nasty going there, isn't it, miss? I do hope you weren't running away from me, because I can't think why you should."

Now that she saw him clearly Miss Grahame could not think why she should, either; there was nothing formidable about his appearance. He was undersized, narrow-chested, with a slight stoop. Not only had he neither beard nor moustache, but he had no eyebrows either; there was a pinkish tinge about his eyes which reminded her of a ferret's. He had on a shabby blue serge suit, and a billy-cock hat, a size too big for him, which he wore a little on one side of his head. Miss Scarlett had referred to his closely-cut hair; but so far as Elsie could see the thing went farther; his head was as hairless as his face.

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His manner was apologetic, and there was that in his appearance which seemed to hint that the more he was allowed to keep himself in the background the better pleased he would be. Miss Grahame felt that she had seldom seen a person whom she liked less at first sight.

"What do you mean by daring to follow me about?" she demanded. "Who are you?"

"As to who I am, miss, a party did ought to have a name, didn't he? Shall I say my name's Fitzherbert—Lionel Fitzherbert; a good name Lionel, and a good name Fitzherbert—Lionel Fitzherbert, Esquire; I couldn't have a more respectable name, could I? And of course, miss, you're Miss Grahame. Very pleased I am to make your acquaintance."

Although his bearing was cringing it was insolent; in some indescribable fashion it was threatening also; as if he were some dangerous, obscene creature, who only needed courage to take her by the throat.

"What are you doing in these woods? Are you aware that they are private?"

"Private, are they? Think of that! Such nice woods! I always have held that all land ought to be national property, then we shouldn't hear about woods being private. But I suppose that when a party has business there he's admitted even to a private wood; and it so happens that I did have what might be called a little business with you."

"What business could you possibly have with me?"

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Nothing could have been more contemptuous and defiant than the air with which the girl put the question ; and nothing more outwardly deferential and more covertly insolent and threatening than the strain in which he answered.

"That's just it—what business could a chap like me have with a young lady like you ? I will say this, miss, that whatever does come of it I've had a very pleasant afternoon ; and so accidental, like. I saw you find those papers in the tree, and I saw Miss Scarlett find you finding them, and I heard every word you said to each other. Lucky Mr. Palgrave ! He may have got himself into trouble—we all of us do it sometimes—but we don't all of us win the love of a girl like that. 'The Red-Headed Queen of Song and Dance !' Ah, many a time I've seen her in the halls, and I've almost fell in love with her myself. I was very glad that I was able to give you that tip about them coppers. It's not nice having dealings with them ; no one knows that better than I do. Very sorry I should have been to see two such charming young ladies in their hands—very sorry indeed."

"I don't think we ran much risk. Will you be so good as to tell me what is your business with me—if you have any, which I very much doubt—and go."

She tried to be scornful again ; but the effort was rather a failure. In spite of herself she was conscious of a sinking of the heart caused by something which she seemed to see between the fellow's words. That

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his intention was that she should see that something every instant she suspected more and more.

"Oh no, miss, you don't doubt, you don't do nothing of the kind ; not you. You know that I've got business with you, and, what's more, you know what the business is."

"How should I know ?"

"Ah, miss, that's it—how should you know ? Is it because conscience makes cowards of us all—is that it ? Your conscience has all at once made a coward of you. Look how white you've got, all the pretty colour's gone out of your cheeks ; and how your eyes are staring, as if they saw a ghost, or something worse ; and how you're standing as if you were struck to the ground. If you didn't know what my business was you wouldn't stop there talking to muck like me—you, a fine young lady. You'd order me off ; and if I wouldn't go you'd march to the house, and send your servants to chuck me into the road—but you don't because you know it's me who can do the ordering, not you."

Undoubtedly a surprising change had taken place in the young lady's appearance, which was not inaccurately described by the fellow's words. It even seemed as if something had tied her tongue into knots, so that she experienced a difficulty in speaking ; it was with obvious pains that she delivered herself of a short sentence.

"I—I don't know what you mean."

"Now, Miss Grahame, don't you tell me a lie—

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excuse my plain speaking—but don't you do it. Don't let there be any lies between you and me—it will be such a pity. You do know what I mean, but although you know I'll tell you. What does Shakespeare say 'about a deed without a name'? That's it, a deed without a name, and, to my thinking, you and me had better leave it without a name. Now, you do know what I mean."

It seemed that she did. And the knowledge had brought something into her face which had changed its entire character, something which it was terrible to see. The sight of it seemed even to affect the man in front of her; he shrank backwards, as if frightened. His observations took the form of a remonstrance; his voice became more pronouncedly a whisper—always with a curiously penetrating quality.

"That sort of thing's no good; what's the good of it? I once saw Macbeth; what struck me about the play most was what a fool he made of himself afterwards—Macbeth, I mean. What's done's done; his own words showed he knew that as well as anyone; yet he kept making a fuss about spilt milk. It made me sick the way he carried on afterwards. You've no call to be afraid of me."

"Do you suppose that I am afraid of you?"

The question was so patly asked, and in so curious a tone, that his discomfiture was evident. He drew back with a startled gesture, as if the fear were on his side rather than on hers.

"I'm sure I don't want you to be afraid of

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me ; all I want is that we should understand each other."

"Then let us do so at once. How am I to understand you ?"

Again her manner had suddenly altered. She strode towards him through the gorse bushes with the air of one who carries a weapon in either hand. It was she who seemed to threaten, he who cowered.

"Don't you try to come that over me, because I won't have it."

"Tell me what I'm to understand."

"I'll tell you when it suits me, but not till."

It almost seemed as if she would have taken him by the throat. When she went close up to him she was so much the taller of the two that, compared to her, his shrinking attitude seemed to make of him a pygmy. One felt that if she had had a weapon in her hand she would have struck him—the consciousness that that was so made him play the cur.

"Don't you touch me—or you'll be sorry."

"Touch you !"

As she echoëd his words she laughed, and at the sound of her laughter he started ; his arm went up as if to screen his head.

"The only thing with which I'd touch you would be a pitchfork. I'd use it to thrust you into the gutter, and to keep you there, till you were carried off, with the rest of the refuse, into the main sewer."

Turning, she strode off along the path. He called after her.

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"All right!—that's the line you're going to take, is it? Very well, I'm agreeable. Only, mind you, I know, and you know I know; and if you don't come to a proper understanding with me you'll be sorry."

Miss Grahame went on a few steps further, then suddenly stopping, turned again, speaking to him from where she stood.

"Pray, what do you call a proper understanding?" He glanced furtively about him.

"It's no good our speaking too loud; we don't want the rabbits and the pheasants to know our business; if you don't mind I'll come a little closer."

She said nothing; he came towards her along the path. When he was within about six feet of her she stopped him.

"That's close enough. I'm afraid of neither the pheasants nor the rabbits."

He drew the back of his hand across his thin colourless lips, keeping his ferret's eyes fixed on her in an unblinking stare.

"Just so; only you know what I mean. There's no call for you to think that I mean to be unfriendly."

"Please don't try to be friendly with me."

"A man can't help it where a nice young lady like you is concerned."

"If you were to make a remark like that to me with a convenient pond in reach I'd put you into it."

"I've no doubt you'd try; not a mite of doubt. Uncommon quick with your hands you are; uncommon—as I happen to know."

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There was something behind his words which he intended her to see, and which she saw. The rigidity came back to her face, seeming even to alter its shape, so that it was square, and set, and hard. And a gleam came into her eyes which affected him so unpleasantly that he made what was perhaps a shuffling attempt at an apology.

"You shouldn't provoke me ; it's your fault. I don't want to speak of it ; I shouldn't speak of it if you weren't to talk about putting me into ponds. I don't like that kind of thing any more than you like the other ; it isn't to be supposed I should—very well, then ! You treat me reasonably and I'll treat you the same—that's all I ask."

Again he drew the back of his hand across his lips, as if he wished the gesture to express the fact that no one could be more reasonable than he desired to be. As she said nothing he went on :

"I did mean to finish our little business right straight off ; and I did hope we should have parted friends ; but after what happened this afternoon, your finding the papers, and Miss Scarlett, and them two coppers, and all, things have been altered—see what I mean ?"

"I do not."

Perhaps it was something which she saw in his unpleasant eyes, which he kept fixed in an unblinking stare upon her face, which caused her lips to twitch as if in anger, as throughout his tone, when he spoke, was significant of much more than his words conveyed.

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"We'll leave it at that—that you don't know what I mean, though I've my doubts. I'm rather afraid that we shall have to put off our little understanding till this evening. There are one or two things I should like to think about; we don't want to do anything in a hurry, either of us, do we? Suppose we say that if you take a constitutional by yourself after dinner you'll find me in the summer-house? It's a convenient distance for a stroll, is the summer-house; and we shall be all alone, with no one likely to interrupt us; it is on the bank of the lake, so that if you feel like it you can throw me in. And, anyhow, I shan't keep you long; when we've once got fairly to work we ought to understand each other very nicely in less than five minutes. Shall we put it that you'll come to have a little chat with me in the summer-house after dinner?"

"You can put it as you choose. I'll give instructions that the dogs are to be let loose, so that the grounds may be kept clear of tramps."

"Oh no, you won't; not you; you'll come and have that little chat. When you've thought things over quietly, as you will do between this and then, you'll see that that's the safest and the wisest course; and, after dinner, you'll stroll round to the summer-house as sure as you and I are standing here."

Again there was that on her face, and in her attitude, as she silently regarded him, which suggested that if she had been possessed of a convenient weapon of offence it would have been the worse for him, and

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again, as if fearful of he knew not what, he shrunk a little back. But she did nothing, and said nothing. Turning, she moved away from him along the path. He stood and watched her. When she had gained the point at which the wood came to an end, and the path stopped at a gate, on the other side of which were the grounds proper, a sound seemed to rend the quiet air. It was three notes of a whistle ; a high, a low, then a high one again, which someone had whistled with surprising shrillness. Miss Grahame, who had her hand upon the gate, started as if the sound had struck her an actual blow. Looking back she saw that the man was still standing where she had left him, holding a finger to his lips. He called to her, still without seeming to raise his voice, and though he was at a distance of quite one hundred yards, every word he uttered was distinctly audible.

"That's my call, that is, Lionel Fitzherbert's own private and particular. Wherever, and whenever, you hear it, you'll know it's a call to you. If you're not —you know where—in good time, you'll hear it to-night, and you'll know what it means ; as I remarked just now, it'll be a call to you."

CHAPTER XIII

THE VICAR'S SISTER

WHEN Miss Grahame entered the house Mrs. Harmar came out into the hall to meet her.

"Elsie! Where have you been?"

"I've been for a walk in the woods."

"In the woods? My dear, what is the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter. Why do you ask what's the matter?"

"If you see your face in a glass you'll know. You look as Hamlet must have done when he'd been interviewing his father's ghost. Please get rid of that frightful expression! There's Miss Menzies in the morning room; she came soon after you went out. She must want to see you very particularly, because she has been waiting for you ever since—you know her way; she's told me quite frankly she didn't come to see me. Do get some of that black look off your face, and try to find a smile; and tidy your hair; and come to her as fast as ever you can—and I'll go and tell her you are coming."

Mrs. Harmar hastened away. Elsie, after hesitating a moment, turned into the library. A Venetian mirror hung on the wall between the windows.

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When she looked into it she understood why her cousin had asked what was the matter ; she hardly knew her own face. As she raised her hands to arrange her hair she moved the envelope which was in her blouse. So completely was her mind occupied by her interview with Mr. Lionel Fitzherbert that she had forgotten it was there. She glanced about her with anxious eyes. What should she do with it ? She did not know what Miss Menzies wanted, but she had a feeling that she could not go in and see her while the envelope was there. They were on the best of terms. Suppose Miss Menzies were to put her arms about her, and feel it, and ask her what it was ? She would betray herself ; with her nerves so strung that only by fits and starts could she control them, she knew she should. Besides, she had an almost morbid longing to be rid of it; to remove it, at least for a time, from personal contact. It carried with it such uncomfortable associations.

She closed the library door, cautiously, as if she were doing something of which she was ashamed. Unfastening her blouse she withdrew the envelope. In such a state were her nerves that at the mere touch of it her hands trembled. What could she do with the thing ? Where, for the present, might she hide it ? Near her, on a low tripod, was a hammered copper vase ; in it was a fine calceolaria, in full bloom. Between the pot which contained the plant and the vase was sufficient space for an envelope. But would it be deep enough ? An idea

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occurred to her. She drew out the pot ; put the envelope into the vase, and, on top of it the flower. She had not done it very well ; when the plant was back in its place one corner of the envelope was sticking up. It was not likely to be noticed by anyone who was not actually on the look-out for it ; yet it was visible. Elsie felt she had better put it out of sight. She was just about to shift the pot when the telephone bell rang, with the startling suddenness with which telephone bells are apt to ring. She hesitated ; the bell rang again, and again. Hurrying to the table she caught up the receiver.

“ Yes ! Who is it ? ”

No reply.

“ Hullo ! ”

The door was opened ; to admit Mrs. Harmar.

“ Wasn’t that the telephone ? ”

“ It rang, but I don’t know who rang it. There doesn’t seem to be anybody there.”

“ Give it to me ; I’ll attend to it. You go and talk to Miss Menzies. We’ve been boring each other to extinction ; for goodness’ sake do go and see what she wants.”

Elsie yielded the receiver to her cousin. Leaving the library she crossed the hall to the morning room. Miss Menzies was standing by the window. She turned as she came in, bursting into animated speech.

“ You poor thing ! — What a wreck you look ! — What have they been doing to you ? ”

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Precisely as she had foreseen, Miss Menzies put her arms about her, and held her close ; if the envelope had been in its original place she would certainly have felt it. There was something in the near neighbourhood of the other's strong arms which the girl found pleasant. Laura Menzies had been almost as good a friend to her as her brother Peter. If she had not found her quite so sympathetic as the vicar, the difference was one rather of degree than of kind. There was an odd resemblance between the brother and the sister. Each had the same nondescript taste in dress — Laura's was apt to be so masculine that, from a little distance, when she was seated, it was quite easy to mistake her for a man. Each was cobbily built. Both their plain faces were redeemed, not only by an expression of shrewd, good-humoured, common-sense, but also by a radiant something which suggested that theirs was the divine gift of, spiritually, never growing old. Laura was, by several years, the younger of the two : but one felt that, just as the vicar looked as if he were still her age, she would seem no older when she was his. Elsie was taller than she was ; so that when they were close together she had to look up into her face. She did look up at it. Then, as if impelled by something which she saw on it, she drew it down to hers and kissed her on the eyes, and brow, and lip. There was something in the tenderness with which she did it which so stirred the girl that her whole body began to tremble. Miss Menzies, drawing her to a

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couch, seated herself beside her, and immediately the girl began to cry, as if she were a child ; and Miss Menzies proceeded to console her, as if she were a child.

"Isn't it a queer world ? And aren't there some funny people in it ? And don't things all get mixed up, and tangled, anyhow, crossways, so that wherever you turn there's nothing but thorns and thistles, and general horridness ? You can go for days, and days, and days—and get nothing but scratches and a broken heart. But, thank goodness, those days do pass, and then it's extraordinary how soon your scratches heal, and your heart mends, and the world seems a more delightful place even than it did before. Somehow happiness seems heightened by remembered pain, so long as it isn't remembered too keenly, and it's my belief that it never is—there's just memory enough to give to happiness that tonic quality which keeps it from cloying. If you've damped your handkerchief, my dear, use mine."

Miss Menzies held out a serviceable looking article which was in striking contrast to the scrap of lace and muslin with which Miss Grahame was dabbing her eyes. Although, with a movement of her head, she declined the offer, even through her tears Miss Grahame smiled. Returning her property to a patch pocket on her skirt, Miss Menzies changed the subject.

"Elsie, I believe I've been waiting for you for two solid hours by the clock. I daresay your cousin

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would have liked to have put me into a pail of water with a lid on top, but I must admit that she's borne with exemplary eternal patience the failure of her repeated efforts to find out what I wanted you for. You know me; that when I've made up my mind to do a thing I do it, and that when I mean to see a person I stop till I do. It's lucky that you have come, or I don't know how long I should have stopped. Have you seen my brother?"

It was perhaps because the question was so unexpected, and so sudden, that Elsie's cheeks burst into a flame. Miss Menzies, surveying them, read her answer.

"I see you have. So he's done it, has he? Though he never breathed a syllable to me, I knew he would do it if he got a chance. Poor Peter!"

"Why do you say 'Poor Peter'?"

The question was asked with what seemed like a spice of resentment.

"Because Peter loves you as only men of his sort do love a woman. There's a lot of twopenny trash talked about men's love, and women's, too, for the matter of that. Peter's an exception. There's nothing you could ask him to do he wouldn't do, no matter how silly it was; or which he wouldn't do without your asking, if he thought he was doing it for your sake."

"I don't think he's necessarily to be pitied on that account. I like him very much."

"Do you love him?"

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Miss Grahame looked down. She picked evidences of her woodland ramble off her skirt.

"Do you like him enough to be his wife?"

When Elsie answered she was still engaged in finger-ing her dress.

"Would you care for me to be his wife, with so much, with everything against me?"

"There's nothing against you—don't talk nonsense! You, of all people! I know you and you know me. Do you believe that there could be anything against me which would render me unfit to make a decent man a good wife?"

"Of course not; but you are different."

"I am to this extent—that I've had the luck, and you haven't. So it's all the more to your credit that I know you to be incapable of doing anything which would disqualify you, in any real sense, to be a wife of whom the finest and greatest gentleman in the land would have every reason to be proud."

The girl's cheeks flamed more than ever. Her glance was still cast down.

"Laura! You do say things!"

"I only say things which I know to be true, as you're perfectly well aware—it's only affectation to pretend that you're not. As for your asking if I should care for you to be Peter's wife; when I tell you that I've come here for the express purpose of begging you to be his wife, and have waited two solid hours for the chance of doing it, you'll see how absurd your ques-tion is."

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"But why should you wish me to be his wife?"

"For various reasons. I'll begin with one, a very practical one. By becoming his wife you'll be doing me a good turn."

"I don't see how I shall be doing that, anyhow."

"Elsie, have you got any eyes?"

"I've always thought I had."

"I'm beginning to doubt it. As for Peter, I know he's stone blind."

"That sounds flattering. Are you suggesting that he's asked me to be his wife because he's blind to my manifold imperfections?"

"He's not blind where you're concerned, not a bit of it. He sees you, and everything about you, with preternatural clearness. He's only blind where other people are concerned; and, so far as that goes, I'm beginning to suspect that you are too."

"Laura, what do you mean?"

Miss Menzies turned suddenly round on the couch, so that she looked Miss Grahame fairly and squarely in the face.

"Elsie, do you mean to tell me that you've noticed nothing between me and Sholto Pattison?"

"Sholto Pattison? Do you mean—your brother's curate?"

"Your question answers me. And yet I took you to be a girl who could see through a brick wall."

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"But, Laura, you can't mean—do you mean——?"

"Of course—that's just what I do mean. Peter has seen no more than you have; but then he's a man and you're a girl—with such eyes for a thing of that sort. I am surprised at you. Why, you hadn't been a week at Timberham before Peter began to have hankerings for you, and I saw it; and Sholto hadn't been a week at Woodcote before he began to hanker after me; and you've seen nothing until this second; nor Peter either. But I don't count Peter."

"My dear Laura, I confess I have been purblind; but am I to congratulate you, really?"

"From the way you say it one would think that the whole idea was still an incredible one to you. I don't know why it should be. I can only tell you this: ten days ago Sholto asked me if I would be his wife, and I said 'Yes.' He offered to let me have four and twenty hours for consideration; but as I'd been wondering why he hadn't asked me before, I told him that no consideration was required, as my mind was quite as much made up as his own. So I said 'Yes' on the spot. No dilly-dallying for me."

"My dear Laura, I—I do hope you'll be happy."

"But you doubt it—I understand. I know you don't like Sholto."

"It isn't that I dislike him, but he's—he's so awfully good."

"Exactly, I tell him that he's an understudy for

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a saint. That's why we're so well matched ; he supplies the sanctity and I supply the sense—though, mind you, when you know him Sholto's not a fool. The same with you and Peter ; he supplies the material and you the immaterial. Could there be a better combination ? ”

“I don't quite know what you mean.”

“Perhaps not, but I do—you tell Peter what I said, and he'll enlighten you. Now I'm coming to how you will do me a good turn by marrying Peter. I don't want to marry my brother's curate ; and Sholto doesn't want to marry his vicar's sister.”

“I'm afraid I'm very stupid, but again I don't understand. Mr. Pattison is Mr. Menzies' curate, and you are his sister.”

“At present ; that's the bother. Peter's heart is not in the Church, any more than yours is ; you're not tumbling over yourself with anxiety to be a vicar's wife.”

“I certainly am not sure that I have a vocation for—for that kind of thing.”

“I'm not sure either. Now, I have. It has always been my dream to be at least a vicar's wife. But I can't go to Peter and say, ‘Look here, Peter, I'll give you a good round sum for the living, more than it's worth, because I want you to get out of it, and induct Sholto instead, as I'm going to be his wife.’ Perhaps he wouldn't like it.”

“He might—he might misunderstand you.”

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"Just so ; he might. Now you only have to hint to him that you'd rather not be a vicar's wife, and I shouldn't be surprised if he were to present me with the whole thing, lock, stock, and barrel, as a wedding present, and be glad of the chance of getting rid of it. I should keep the living in my own gift, and present Sholto. He'd make an ideal vicar, which Peter never will do. I've lots of money. I shouldn't touch the church outside ; in its way it's a gem ; but within—I'd make it a dream of beauty. I've more taste and more knowledge than you might think, to look at me ; and so has Sholto. No expense and no pains should be spared to make it, as regards service and fabric, the most perfect thing of its kind. And let me tell you that the real service of the real English Church is the most perfect expression of beauty, majesty, and glory that is to be found on earth."

"Is it ? I see."

"But you don't care. Each to his taste. Anyhow, now you also see that by marrying Peter you'll do me a good turn, and make me happy by giving me my life's ambition ; and you'll take Peter away, to where he'll be only too delighted to go, and you'll make him happy too."

"And where do I come in?"

"Elsie, I'll tell you. There are different kinds of love which a woman can feel for a man. There is the physical kind, which women sometimes try to persuade themselves is romantic, transcendental, but

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isn't—I doubt if that kind lasts. Then there is the kind which Peter stands for, which endures and grows greater. You like him already, and you find him sympathetic. You'll find him more sympathetic when you know him better, and you'll grow to like him more. You'll always be able to depend on him, he'll never give you an hour's anxiety; his whole delight will be in you, and in your children, to him you'll represent the whole world; in course of time you'll be amused to find how he has come to represent the whole world to you. And as you come to know the world better, and learn how the average woman fares, you will understand what a comfortable possession a husband of that particular pattern is. My serious advice is—give Peter's offer, on all accounts, your most careful, and most favourable, consideration—for Peter's sake, for my sake; and also, Elsie, for your own. I believe that as Peter's wife you'll be a happy woman. What did you say to him this afternoon?"

"Not much, he didn't ask me to say much; he told me to think things over."

"That's just like Peter. I suppose he saw that if he pressed you for an immediate answer you'd say 'No'?"

"I don't know what he saw."

Miss Menzies was silent; Elsie was silent too. After a perceptible pause Miss Menzies rose.

"Well, my dear, that's all I have to say. You give the matter that four and twenty hours' considera-

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tion which Sholto offered me, and afterwards, please, for all our sakes, and certainly, my dear, not least for your own, say 'Yes.' Good-bye, sister-that-I-hope-is-to-be! Don't trouble to come to the door, and don't ring; I can find my way out."

CHAPTER XIV

A QUESTION OF AN ENVELOPE

MISS GRAHAME remained for some minutes in the morning room, after her visitor had gone, vainly trying to get her thoughts into something like orderly array. She had so many things to think of, so many more than anyone supposed, that they seemed to jostle each other ; refusing to allow themselves to be arranged in any order which would permit of their quiet contemplative study. First there was the vicar ; now there was his sister. As Miss Grahame endeavoured to marshal in her mind what Miss Menzies had been saying, suddenly she thought of the envelope which she had left in the copper vase. Possibly now the field was clear she might be able to reclaim it, and, retreating to her bedroom, examine its contents in undisturbed seclusion. She went quickly to the library. There was no one there. She crossed to the vase—the envelope had gone. The discovery so took her aback that for some instants she could not realise that it was so. She stood staring at the place at which she had left the corner just sticking up enough to be visible. Beyond a doubt there was nothing visible now. Could it have slipped down ? She lifted the flower pot which con-

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tained the calceolaria. Now that the pot was out of it the vase was empty. There certainly was no envelope. She replaced the plant with something of what the feelings of a person might be who had seen some solid article disappear, without rhyme or reason, from under his very eyes. She almost felt as if the envelope had vanished from under her eyes. Who could have taken it ? How had anyone learned that it was there ?

Just before she went in to Miss Menzies the telephone bell had rung ; Mrs. Harmar had taken the receiver out of her hand ; she had left her there. Could Clare—— ? As she left unanswered the unfinished question Mrs. Harmar appeared in the open doorway.

“ So the woman has gone ! My dear child, I thought she was going to stay for ever. What did the creature want with you ? ”

Instead of answering her cousin’s question the girl began one of her own.

“ Did you—— ? ”

She stopped, as if recognising how useless such an inquiry would be.

Mrs. Harmar stared at her.

“ Did I——what ? ”

Without attempting to reply, moving to an open window, Miss Grahame leaned out, as if seeking the relief of the fresh air. Mrs. Harmar knit her pretty brows in apparent perplexity.

“ My dear Elsie, I told you before you went in to that woman that you looked as if you’d seen the ghost of Hamlet’s father ; and now that you’ve come out you

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look as if you'd seen two more. What did she want with you?"

"She only wanted to talk to me."

"Only wanted to talk to you? I didn't suppose she wanted to hit you—though she might as well have done from the looks of you. I only wondered what she wanted to talk to you about that was so frightfully mysterious."

"She wanted to talk to me about one or two things."

"Did she? Indeed? How extremely lucid! Of course, if they were such private and particular things I suppose they're no business of mine—though you didn't use to have any secrets from me."

If the words were meant for a hint Miss Grahame did not take it. Leaning against a table Mrs. Harmar stood observing her as if she were trying to make her out.

"Elsie, I'm older than you——"

"Ten months."

"Ten such months. Besides, I'm a married woman, and a married woman is always much older than an unmarried girl."

"I doubt it."

"I'm a married woman, and I know. Anyhow, you and I have always been the very best of friends, and I hope we always shall be the very best of friends; but I've noticed that something seems to be growing up inside you which makes me anxious. During the last few days you've become a different girl, and, what's worse, the change continues, so that I don't know where you'll

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get to. Please do stop! For goodness' sake don't cultivate nerves. If we're not careful, you and me, we shall get into such a state of nervous strain that every breeze that blows, every passing shadow, every trivial thing that's done or left undone, every chance word, will be to us as so many pin-pricks; so that, as it were, we shall be kept on the edge of a perpetual scream. Nothing could happen to us worse than that; nothing. Elsie, what's done's done; we can't undo it. Can't you accept the inevitable?"

"I've got to."

"But not in that tone, or with that air. That's not accepting it, that's playing the coward."

"Is it? I am sorry."

"If you really are sorry it will be all right. Because then you'll pull yourself together, stiffen your back, get a smile in your eyes, pluck in your heart, and be the Elsie I have known; the Elsie who was my one bridesmaid; the best and dearest girl in all the world, and the truest friend. By the way, who's Lionel Fitzherbert?"

"Clare!"

"Elsie! Don't yell like that!"

Mrs. Harmar was holding both hands to her left breast as if her cousin's raised tones had gone through her like a knife.

"I beg your pardon, but—why did you ask me such a question?"

"Gracious, child, if every time you're asked a question you're going to scream out like that it will

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be impossible for anyone to live with you. From the way you called out anybody might have thought I'd hurt you. Why are you glaring at me like that?"

"I'm very sorry—I keep on being sorry; but I didn't know I was glaring. I was only wondering—why you asked the question."

"Just before you went off to Miss Menzies the telephone bell rang, didn't it? You gave me the receiver, and I asked who was there. No one answered. I asked two or three times, but still no answer. I put down the receiver and went into the garden to see if a little out of doors would do my head good; the struggle to make talk with Miss Menzies had started it splitting. I don't know how long I'd been out when the telephone began ringing again. Back I came, and again I asked. Someone replied—I'll give you the exact words; they were such odd ones: 'Excuse me, miss'—I don't know if the speaker took me for a servant, or what—'but would you mind asking Miss Elsie Grahame not to forget that the name's Lionel Fitzherbert, Esquire.' There the speaker stopped. I waited for him to go on, but no, not another sound. I asked who Mr. Lionel Fitzherbert was, what he wanted, but not another syllable came through the 'phone. Apparently in that one rather remarkable sentence Mr. Lionel Fitzherbert had said his say right out. I don't know who Lionel Fitzherbert, Esquire, may be, but there's not much 'Esquire' about his voice; if ever I heard a Cockney of the lowest type speaking I heard one then. Pray, who is Mr. Lionel Fitzherbert?"

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While Mrs. Harmar had been speaking her cousin had turned again to the window, and now stood with her back towards her.

"I know no more than you do."

"Don't you? Is that a fact? I presume that's why you gave such a shriek when I mentioned the name. Very well, Elsie, as you please. I foresee that you're going to drag me into an atmosphere in which my nerves will be torn to fiddle strings; not that it matters in the least—at any rate to you."

Moving to the copper vase, Mrs. Harmar began to smooth the splendid blooms of the plant, delicately, with the tip of her little finger.

"There's something else I want to ask you about, Elsie, now that we are on delicate subjects; and that's uncle's will."

If Miss Grahame started at the mention of the word "will," it seemed as if her cousin did not notice it.

"That's a matter on which we shall have to come to some arrangement, you and me, and as soon as we conveniently can, or it appears that if we don't things will get into a pretty muddle."

Mrs. Harmar paused, as if for her cousin to speak. There was a quite perceptible period of silence, during which it seemed that either Miss Grahame had nothing to say, or that, if she had, she did not intend to say it. On the other hand, something in Mrs. Harmar's bearing conveyed the impression that she did not propose to go on until the other had spoken. As if conscious of her cousin's attitude Miss Grahame asked

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a question, still with her face turned to the garden, and with her back to Mrs. Harmar. She asked it very softly, and very clearly ; one felt that she would not have asked it if compulsion had not been put upon her.

“Clare, have you seen an envelope ?”

Again there was a perceptible pause before an answer ever came. Mrs. Harmar continued to stroke the petals of the flower. There was a look on her face as if she were trying to make out to what her cousin’s question referred.

“An envelope ? What envelope ?”

“Have you seen an envelope since you were in this room ?”

It was perhaps because Mrs. Harmar detected something in Elsie’s tone which seemed to be meant to be significant that the expression on her face became one of puzzlement.

“My dear child, what do you mean ?”

“I only wondered ; that was all.”

“Only wondered ? I speak to you about uncle’s bothering will, and instead of seeming to pay the least attention to what I’m saying, you fly off at a tangent to ask me if I’ve seen an envelope. Have you lost one—or what ?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Really, Elsie, you’re very mysterious, or very inconsequent—you are certainly trying. Would you kindly favour me with your attention for a very few minutes ? I’m talking to you about uncle’s will—his

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will, you understand. I don't know if you're aware of it, but it seems that we're in a very awkward position, both of us. There's one will found; and another which may be found, or mayn't. But it seems that until it's made clear if it is or isn't going to be found—and heaven knows how long that will take—there won't be anything for either of us; no money, no nothing, unless, that is, we come to some arrangement. Edwin's been trying, on his own behalf, to get some money out of the lawyers, but not a penny will they fork up until, as they put it, matters are settled. As perhaps you know, or, if you don't actually know, you've probably guessed, since Edwin lost, or spent, or something, all his own money we've been practically living on what he borrowed from uncle; and now, as there's no uncle to borrow from, and the lawyers won't stump up, we're in a hole."

"But, as matters stand, everything that uncle left is yours."

Mrs. Harmar held out her hands with a pretty little gesture of distress.

"My dear child, what is the use of your talking like that after what I've just now told you. Mr. Lazarus, Messrs. Meerham and Kirby, uncle's managing men, and other horrid people, not one of them will consent to our having a penny, until, as they put it, a reasonable time has elapsed to enable uncle's other will to be found. What a reasonable time is no one seems to know. And, in the meanwhile, what are Edwin and I to do? We're practically penniless."

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"I'm in the same condition."

"Are you? How delightful! What a moneyed household we seem to be! But we go one better than you; for not only are we penniless but we owe everybody money."

"I owe quite ten pounds."

"Quite ten pounds!—you lucky wretch! If we only owed ten hundred! Elsie, what do you think are the chances of your will—I call it your will, because, by it, you get everything—being found?"

Miss Grahame had moved so that she and her cousin were nearly face to face. She regarded her intently for some seconds, Mrs. Harmar meeting her inspection with wide open, innocent eyes, in which there was just a touch of wonder; then she turned again to the window. There was a suggestion of restraint in the formal phrase in which she replied.

"It is hardly a question on which I am competent to form an opinion."

Mrs. Harmar's speaking voice was one of her greatest charms, it was always so soft and musical. The almost phenomenal sweetness with which she spoke then was in odd contrast to the keen scrutiny to which she was subjecting so much of her cousin as could be seen from her back.

"It appears that the lawyers have a theory that the will which can't be found was stolen by someone that night—but who could have stolen it?"

There was no answer from the girl at the window,

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who stood motionless. After a pause had made it clear that she meant to keep silent Mrs. Harmar went on, always softly and sweetly.

"It's bad enough that they should have such a theory—isn't it, dear? But it seems that one result will be that if we two don't come at once to some arrangement, the whole thing will be thrown into some dreadful law court, and that'll be much worse. So, Elsie, please, do agree with me."

"I don't know what you mean. I'm not aware that I have ever disagreed with you."

Mrs. Harmar sighed, as if she found her cousin a little dull.

"We are quite ready to concede, Edwin and I, that the probabilities are that your will is sure to come to light; and that, in any event, you are entitled to the lion's share. All we want is enough to pay our debts, and to enable us to live, however humbly. My suggestion is that you should have two-thirds and we the remaining third."

"I won't have a penny."

"Elsie!—don't be absurd."

"I have already told you that I won't touch a penny of uncle's money; and I won't. I am prepared to sit down now and draw up a paper renouncing all claims I may have in your favour."

"But how are you going to live? I understand that Rupert Earle's wonderful invention is coming off—if it does it will be the first invention I ever heard of that did—and that he's likely to be a multi-millionaire.

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I do trust you're going to marry him. If you are, as you'll be wallowing in gold, I can begin to understand your quixotic generosity; but if you aren't, I must confess that you're beyond me altogether."

"I am not going to marry Mr. Earle."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"I shall manage."

"Oh, will you! It's so easy for a girl with no prospects to marry on nothing a year! I'll make no comment on your attitude now beyond remarking that even if I were to go to Mr. Lazarus and his friends with that paper in my hands they'd 'hum' and 'ha,' and 'ha' and 'hum,' before they'd advance me even so much as a thousand pounds; they'd very properly look at me askance when they saw what a thumping profit I was going to make out of your—nobility; we'll call it nobility, my love. No, Elsie, what I want is something practical. I want you to join me in drawing up a request for, say, ten thousand pounds. As it seems that one of us must have everything; if we make such a request in our joint names they can hardly refuse to let us have so much of it. Indeed, Mr. Lazarus has as good as promised; and if he won't, Edwin knows someone who will. You see, Elsie—I may as well be frank, though frankness is apt to be a bit of a nuisance—Edwin has stupidly got himself into a silly mess, so that it's absolutely essential that we should get hold of a large sum of money in the next few days—and that's how it is with us."

"I'm quite ready to join you in such a paper if it's

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understood that I'm to have no part of the money ; that all of it is for you."

" Such an understanding needn't be in the paper—need it ? "

There was a cynical note in Mrs. Harmar's gentle tones which apparently gave Miss Grahame food for reflection ; or maybe the lady only saw in what might have been an imaginary stiffening in her cousin's pose the possibility of its having done so. Her tone changed ; it became supplicatory, tremulous, pathetic.

" Elsie, you must take pity on us, you really must. You don't know what a bad mess we are in, Edwin and I, or you wouldn't hesitate. I'm not asking you for an answer at once ; take to-night to think it over ; but, to-morrow, if you could do what I ask, you would lift such a load of anxiety off my mind, and render me a service for which I shall evermore be grateful."

When Mrs. Harmar had finished Miss Grahame remained silent, as if she were pondering over her cousin's words. Then turning, she pressed the inquiry she had put before.

" Clare, are you quite sure that you have not found an envelope anywhere in this room since I went out to see Miss Menzies ? "

" My dear child, what ridiculous idea have you got hold of ? What wonderful envelope is it I am supposed to have found ? "

" I have paid attention to you ; now pay attention to me, and please answer my question—just yes or no."

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"What is your question?"

"It's that way, is it?—I see. Thank you—I am sorry."

Again the girl returned to the window. Mrs. Harmar broke out with what, for her, was heat.

"Elsie, what do you mean? You talk in riddles, and because I don't begin to understand you, you take on airs, I don't know what envelope you're talking about; but I've seen no envelope, of any sort or kind, not only in this room, or in any room, or in any part of the house, neither since you went to see Miss Menzies nor during the whole of to-day. Will that do for you?"

"Are you quite sure?"

"Really, it is I who will have to be thankful. When I tell you that a thing is so, is it necessary that I should swear to it?"

The telephone bell began to ring. Mrs. Harmar moved to the table. As she took up the receiver she gave utterance to a pious wish which might almost have been intended for a shot at Miss Grahame.

"Now, who's that? Do let's hope that it's not that aristocratic friend of yours whose anxiety has moved him to reiterate his entreaty that you won't forget that his name is Lionel Fitzherbert, Esquire. You will certainly have to reassure him yourself if it is."

CHAPTER XV

THE FISHPOND

THE two ladies dined alone. The telephone message was from Edwin Harmar, who informed his wife that he had met a friend with whom he proposed to dine. When asked who the friend was he told her that it was Rupert Earle, adding certain comments which were undoubtedly intended to reach her ear alone. The first part of the message she passed on to her cousin ; the latter part she kept to herself.

That evening meal was not an exhilarating function. Had either lady ventured to follow the secret prompting of her heart she would have suggested that they should have no formal meal at all ; the other would with alacrity have acquiesced. As it was, they sat down to a fairly elaborate repast—John Culver had always insisted on having a good dinner —of which they both ate practically nothing. The scant attention they paid to the several dishes was not flattering to the cook. Conversation was almost as much to seek as appetite. Mrs. Harmar made gallant efforts to talk about something, but Miss Grahame was so unresponsive that the failure of her attempts was tragic. Such a cloud of gloom settled

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about the festive board that before the feast was more than half way through Mrs. Harmar, taking her courage with both hands, asked her companion if she wanted anything else, receiving her negative with an air of unmistakable relief.

When the two ladies, having quitted the dining-room, were out in the hall, Mrs. Harmar said, with what, in one so equable, was something more than petulance :

"Upon my word, Elsie, you are beyond anything —you really are too awful. I'm going to bed, or, at any rate, I'm going to my room. I don't know when Edwin's coming in; and about you there is such an air of unutterable depression that, if I must have the blues, I may as well have them alone—if you don't mind."

Miss Grahame did not seem to mind at all. Mrs. Harmar went upstairs; soon after Miss Grahame went out. Going round to the stable yard, which, at that time of night was deserted, she unchained the great St. Bernard, Boris. Passing a lead through his collar she started off with him on what seemed a stroll round the grounds.

It was a fine night. The stars hung in glistening masses in a cloudless sky. What breeze there was came from the south. If Boris wondered what was the cause of his being treated to such an unwonted constitutional, like a gentleman, he asked no questions, but, without straining at the leash, kept stately pace at the lady's side. In Miss Grahame's mind her

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cousin's words were rankling. She had not resented them, because she knew how true it was that about her there was an air of unutterable depression ; yet the knowledge that her cousin had commented on it with so much frankness, and so little sympathy, hurt her none the less.

Always it was with the storm and stress of life that she had been most familiar. True, there had been a time, when she was the merest child, in the land of her birth, where the sun shines oftener, when she had known happiness, which, looking back, seemed to have been unalloyed. But that time had gone with her childhood. Tragedy, rather than comedy, became her daily fare. Her parents never had been rich ; her father had never achieved material success. The struggle to do so had killed him. Before long his wife was with him in the same grave. At her unknown uncle's suggestion Elsie had come to England. That was the greatest tragedy of all.

At home, whatever there had not been, there was love ; at Timberham, whatever there might be, there was not love. To the last moment of his life her uncle was beyond her comprehension ; as it were, an inmate of an entirely different world to that in which she herself breathed, and moved, and had her being. He treated her as if she were a nonentity, allowing her to have no share in the household management, even to the extent of ordering an occasional meal. So far as he was concerned he encouraged her to take no interest in anything ; she was absolutely without

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occupation ; in his presence, if he could help it, he would not even allow her to indulge in that last refuge of a woman, fancy work. Sometimes, when he was at home, he would not speak to her for days ; not because he was offended, or out of temper, but merely because it was his habit to say as little as he could to anyone. During his frequent absences—she never knew when he was going or when he would return—she was entirely alone ; she herself had never slept a night away from Timberham since her arrival. Without seeming to assert himself, he had what amounted to an uncanny faculty of making those persons with whom he was brought in contact subservient to his even unexpressed will ; she knew by instinct what he did not wish her to do, and that by the exercise of some power of which she was conscious, although it remained invisible, he would not let her do it.

Apparently it had never occurred to him to suppose that beyond food, clothes, and a bed to sleep in, she could desire anything. He informed her, when she first came, that on the first of each month he would give her a sovereign for her personal expenses ; that she was to get her clothes from certain tradesmen whom he named, in the neighbouring country town ; that the bills were to be sent to him ; that under no circumstances was their united total to exceed ten pounds for any one quarter. Situated as she was the monthly pound proved ludicrously insufficient—she had to spend money in certain directions to keep herself from going mad. Try as she might she could not help

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incurring small debts. She never spoke of them to her uncle ; whether he knew of them she could never tell ; she had an eerie feeling that he knew everything.

One thing of flesh and blood did come into her life—Rupert Earle ; whether her uncle knew of him, that again, she could not tell. Their acquaintance had been of the strangest kind. She had just met him at Clare's wedding ; that day from which everything dated. He had been Edwin Harmar's best man. She had had her first real conversation with him nearly a year afterwards ; they had spent the better part of a summer's afternoon together in the woods. Thence-forward she had realised that he might mean to her the world. Their intimate meetings had probably not numbered more than a dozen altogether. Each had left her with a firmer feeling that even for her the sun might shine. Then had come that amazing night, which had begun so happily, when she had felt his arms about her ; when her very soul had seemed to be leaping out from her to him ; that night of the interrupted kiss. That first kiss she had ever had from any man, save her father — when, just as his lips touched hers, they had been drawn away again, leaving her trembling ; leaning against the tree near which they had been standing, because the solid ground seemed slipping from beneath her feet. Even now she had only to close her eyes to feel on her lips the touch of his, and whenever she did, again the solid ground seemed slipping from beneath her feet. As then ; when she all at once stood still, and shut her

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eyes, and reeled, so that Boris supposed her to be tugging at his collar.

There was in the grounds of Timberham a piece of water of some size, known as the fishpond, which possibly dated from the times when pious gentlefolk deemed it a convenience to have at hand a supply of fish ready for such days as the Church appointed should be held as fasts. Miss Grahame and Boris had come in sight of it. It was in shape an irregular oval. Nearly the whole way round it was fringed with trees. At the point at which they had approached they stood under a canopy of silver beeches, which left them so much in shadow that they could hardly have been visible to the keenest eyes. They were at the narrowest end, so that in front the silent, motionless face of the water stretched in ever widening mystery. It was a tradition at Timberham that there never was a ripple on the fishpond because the water was so deep. Elsie herself had noticed how, even in the strongest wind, its surface was scarcely ruffled. Always it was calm, and clear, and dark. She had imagined that it was dark because it was so deep, that, in spite of its clearness, one could never see the bottom. But they told her that the darkness was in large measure owing to the fact that it lay rather in a hollow, to the shadows cast by the surrounding trees, and that she could not see the bottom because it was so clogged by weeds. She knew, however, of her own knowledge, that it really was deep. More than once, standing on the edge, probing with a walking-stick, she had

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been surprised to find how difficult it was to reach a stopping point. If, so near the bank, the bed was so far from the surface, it was reasonable to presume that in the centre it was farther yet.

From where she stood the ground went sloping up on the left. At about the highest part stood the summer-house of which the man had spoken that afternoon in the wood. She wondered how he had come to know of its existence. The lake was rather remote from the house. Many people who had been often in Timberham had never seen it; while the summer-house was so shut in by trees that only from one side could it be clearly seen. He had spoken of it as one might have done who knew it well. She had had a feeling about him that he was acquainted both with the house and its surroundings. Who could he be? Some jackal or her uncle's? She remembered, once, finding him closeted with an individual of much the same outward type as Mr. Fitzherbert. When, afterwards, she asked him, with unusual courage, who the person was, he told her, with a grin, that when he was not a burglar he was a bailiff; adding, with the grin grown wider, that there was not a man in England who employed more bailiffs than he did, since there was scarcely a day out of the annual three hundred and sixty-five on which he had not a man in possession of an Englishman's castle somewhere—Sundays and Bank Holidays included. Perhaps this fellow was, in that sense, an acquaintance of her uncle's. If he was

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she was convinced that he was more burglar than bailiff.

Since she could not swim, how easy it would be for her to drop into the quiet black water, and so end everything. Before very long it quite probably might come to something of the kind—beyond a doubt, in case of a certain eventuality, it would be the better ending of the two. Although her years had not yet numbered twenty-three, and the blood of healthy youth ran riot in her veins, and she had even more than her share of those physical attributes which make of a woman a prize to be greatly desired by men, she knew that before she had reached the beginning, all for her was finished ; so that her heart cried out within her in exceeding bitterness, because of the fate which had befallen her. None the less her sense of humour was sufficiently to the front to make her conscious that, if she did try dropping into the water at that particular moment, Boris would undoubtedly try his very best to fish her out again.

With Boris still on the lead, she turned to the left, along the path which sloped upwards, holding herself very straight, as she always did. In her black gown, whose skirts she allowed to trail behind her, with her head uncovered, holding the dog with her right hand, the pair moved slowly onward ; as if their sole purpose was to enjoy the softness and the sweetness of the night. Presently an odour reached her nostrils which had nothing to do with the perfume of the trees, and flowers, and of the night — it was the

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odour of some bad tobacco which was being smoked in a foul pipe. Apparently Boris smelt it at the same moment she did ; with it, possibly, he smelt something else as well ; something which was not to his taste ; because he began to strain slightly at his lead, and to growl. With a slight movement of her wrist she drew him back.

“Boris—be still.”

The words were only whispered, but they were enough for the dog. He came silently into step again at her side, though with head a little raised, eyes looking straight forward, every sense on the alert. The summer-house loomed like a darker shadow twenty or thirty yards in front of them. When it was within a dozen feet Miss Grahame stood still ; the dog stopped too. The smell of tobacco had grown stronger, but beyond that there was nothing to show that anything human was close at hand ; nothing, at least, which would have made it evident to the girl’s imperfect senses. The dog was wiser, his keener vision, penetrating the darkness, perceived that on the seat at the back of the wooden structure a man was lolling, a man, his instinct told him, of the type he particularly disliked. His hair bristled, he showed his teeth, it was with an effort he kept himself from growling. But he felt the lady’s hand tighten on the lead ; something told him she would rather he was quiet. So the girl and Boris stood still, and for some seconds nothing happened, until a voice proceeding from the darkness proclaimed

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the fact that its owner liked the dog as little as the dog liked him.

"What have you brought that great brute with you for? I can't abide dogs, and never could. You aren't afraid, are you?"

In the darkness the girl smiled, for the first time that night.

"I'm not at all afraid, thank you. But judging from your voice, I should say that you were a little nervous."

"It's that great beast of a dog. I hate 'em, and they know it. I never met a dog yet whose throat I wouldn't like to slit. If I had my way I'd have more than half of them got rid of to-morrow, and what was left I'd make their owners keep chained up. Dangerous animals I call 'em; they didn't ought to be allowed out in public places."

"This is not a public place."

"That don't make no difference; don't you let that dog come near me."

"I told you that I should have the dogs let loose to clear the premises of tramps. Tramps are animals to which Boris has a great objection. You have no idea how good he is at getting rid of them."

"By God, if you let that brute come near me I'll do for him as sure as you're alive."

The man had taken something from his pocket, which he was holding out in front of him; something which was visible to the dog but not to the lady. Straining at the lead, Boris gave an angry growl.

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"If you let him loose I'll shoot!"

There was no resemblance to a whisper about the man's voice then; it came through the darkness almost as if he screamed. Elsie gripped the lead with both hands. She did not raise her voice, but in an instant it was aflame with anger.

"You coward! You unutterable cur! You apology for a man! You dare to talk of shooting Boris, such a thing as you! It's his duty to keep the place clear of such vermin as you. If I bid him do his duty, and you dare molest him in the execution of his duty, as you use him I'll use you, and ten times worse; this shall be the sorriest night you've ever known. Come out of there, into the open where I can see you—must we come in and fetch you out? Then we'll see if you will shoot us both."

The scream was changed to something very like a whine.

"I never did meet the likes of you, I really never did; I've no wish to make myself disagreeable, far from it; and I certainly don't want to start shooting anything—why should I? Only it so happens that if there's one thing on earth which I can't abide it is dogs, especially big ones, like that one you've got there. I can't help it, I was born that way. All I ask is that you'll promise not to let go of the dog, and that you'll go a little farther back with him, and I'll come out with pleasure. I've no wish to stop in here. All I really want is that there should be no unpleasantness; no one could say fairer than that."

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There was silence, as if the girl were considering the unseen speaker's words. Then she laughed, softly. Though she did not know it, at the sound of her laughter the man within, starting on the seat, seemed to try to draw himself closer to the summer-house wall. Stooping slightly she addressed the dog, but scarcely in terms which were calculated to reassure the listener.

"Come, Boris—you hear that creature? He's afraid of you. Creatures of his sort always are afraid of dogs; when a man's afraid of a dog you may be sure there's not much good in him. Decent people never are afraid of dogs; you know that, don't you, Boris? Let's humour the creature, and go what he calls 'a little farther back,' and then see if he will dare to come out where we can see him."

She moved back with Boris perhaps a dozen feet.

"Is that far enough?" she asked.

"It is if you promise not to let go of him; so long as you don't let go of him everything will be perfectly all right: only, to avoid unpleasantness, I'd like you to promise."

"While you behave yourself, as well as it is in you to behave, I'm not likely to loose the dog, but I'll make you no definite promise. Only, if you don't come out we'll fetch you—the two of us."

Her words were followed by another interval of silence, as if the man within the summer-house were finding them rather more ambiguous than he quite liked. Then, apparently, he gained some fragments

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of what stood to him for courage. With steps which were obviously not so eager as they might have been he came sufficiently far out to enable her at least to get a glimpse of him ; as he came she was conscious that Boris would have liked to growl. With a movement of the hand she checked him.

CHAPTER XVI

SPLASH !

HE still retained a pipe between his lips ; and in his right hand was something to which he made haste to call attention.

“This is a revolver, this is, and every chamber’s charged. Every man’s entitled to defend himself ; and if you set that dog at me I shall use it to defend myself against him, be the consequences what they may. But so long as you keep hold of him you’ll find that there’s no more harm about this pop-gun than if it was a toy.”

When he ceased there was still another interval before she answered. When she did her tone was curt ; she addressed him much more contemptuously than she had done her dog.

“I hear what you say. What I want to know is why you are here at all ?”

“I’m here because I want to come to that little understanding with you of which I spoke this afternoon. I’ve been thinking things over since then, and you’ll find me both ready and willing.”

“On what subject is it possible that I could come to an understanding with you ?”

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"If you don't know I'm sure I don't; if you like we'll leave it at that. In that case I'm sorry I troubled you, and without keeping you a moment longer, I'll take myself right off. Mark you, if I do I'll go straight to Inspector Felkin, and don't you make any mistake about it."

There was a momentary hesitation before she spoke again. When she did something had happened to her voice.

"Pray, what would you say to Inspector Felkin?"

"I should tell him that on a certain night I was outside a certain window of a certain house. There was someone in the room on the other side of that window; but it was so dark that I should never have made out that it was a young lady, let alone what young lady, if it hadn't been that an old gentleman came into the room with a lighted lamp in his hand——"

"Don't go on! stop!"

"If I once begin, Inspector Felkin won't let me stop—that's what I want you to understand."

The girl seemed to be endeavouring to get the better of her feelings sufficiently to enable her to speak.

"If you saw what took place you know that it was all an accident."

"That may be; on the other hand, it mayn't; it's a point on which, personally, I shouldn't like to pass an opinion. In matters of that sort the law takes its own view of what is an accident and what isn't—as I happen to know."

"You know that I scarcely touched him."

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"Pardon me, but that's just what I do not know. I'll grant that you mayn't have thought that you hit hard. But at such times one's apt to hit harder than one thinks, even if the hitter's feminine—as again I happen to know. I can only tell you that my feeling was that I'd never seen a hearty young woman hit a heartier blow. I thanked my stars that it wasn't me you were hitting ; it's dead sure you'd have laid me out as dead as mutton."

"It's not true ! you know that it's not true !"

"I lay I'm as good a judge of what'll kill a man as you are, and I take my affidavit that that whack you gave him would have killed me, or any other man. What did the doctor say ? Isn't it in evidence ? The proof of the pudding's in the eating."

"But that's just what I don't understand ; how he can have had so dreadful a wound, when I—I know I scarcely touched him."

"Excuse me, but as a man who's had a good deal of experience of a sort, let me tell you that when a party, especially one who's fresh at the game, is caught, as that old gentleman caught you——"

"I wasn't caught ! What do you mean by caught ?"

"Well, you had a cash-box in your hand, what had been broken open ; and I don't fancy that there was much left in it !"

"Do you suppose that I'd broken it open ? Or that I'd taken anything out of it ?"

"Don't let's start supposing ; I don't want to sup-

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pose anything—supposing's not evidence ; let's stick to what is. What I was going to say is this—please don't interrupt—when a person's discovered in a delicate situation, like you were—let's put it that way—he's apt to lose his head—and if it's a lady she'll probably lose it more than ever—to such an extent that he won't know what he is doing ; and when he finds out afterwards what he's done he won't believe it. Let me tell you a story, what's as true as gospel, just to show you what I mean. A party was once a-burgling a house ; the owner came into the room and caught him—that party hit the owner and did a bunk. He didn't know till afterwards that he'd hit him with the corner of a paper weight what weighed about four pounds, and smashed his head to a pulp ; and he couldn't hardly believe it when he did know—he thought that with something what weighed nothing at all he'd given him a touch what was as light as a feather ; so there you are. See what I mean ? ”

“ I hear what you say, but you will not persuade me against the evidence of my own senses. What were you doing outside that window ? ”

“ There you are again. I'd come on business, that was what I was doing there ; but when I saw you do what you did that was enough for me ; I didn't want to be mixed up in a job of that sort. I cut and run empty-handed, as I came. My gosh ! didn't you hit that old gent a downer ! It gave me the creepy crawls to see it.”

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"That's false!—you know that's false!"

"If you really are in earnest it only shows how a looker-on does see most of the game. Then, blow me if I didn't find out afterwards that some other gents had done what I was going to do before I came; so, all things considered, it was just as well I did go. One of them seems to have hid part of his little lot in a tree, as Miss Scarlett knows, to say nothing of you."

Ignoring the reference, Elsie asked a question.

"What was that understanding which you spoke of?"

Taking the pipe from his mouth he knocked out the ashes against the butt of his revolver.

"It's this way. Not only I don't want to give you away, I don't want to give anyone away; I never do, it goes against the grain. When blokes start giving each other away no one ever knows when it's going to stop. And, in your case, giving you away would be specially against the grain; because, when they got me in the witness-box, some inquisitive lawyer would be sure to ask me what you did—what I was doing outside that window. And with a history like mine conclusions might be drawn which would be highly inconvenient to me. No, thank you; the longer I keep out of the witness-box the better I'm pleased—I own it; perfect candour always was a weakness of mine."

He blew through the stem of his pipe as if to make sure that it was clear.

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“On the other hand, what I do want is a fresh start. The chance of making a fresh start in life in a country where every blasted copper don’t treat me as if he’d handled me before, and expected soon to handle me again. The United States of America—that’s the place for a man like me, where talents like mine will be properly appreciated. I’ve got a friend in Colorado who’s getting on like a house afire, who’d be only too glad to have me for a partner, if I’d only got the pieces to buy a share in his business—a nice, snug little business it is. Five hundred pounds is all that would be wanted—five hundred sovereigns. You give me them and I’ll leave England for ever. I’ll change my name, and I’ll not only be dead to you, but I’ll be as if I’d never lived. I’ll make an honest living ; so that, if ever I do marry, I’ll bring to my wife a honest name, one of which our children need never be ashamed. That’s what I mean by coming to an understanding—see ?”

“And where do you suppose I’m to get five hundred pounds from, when I haven’t five hundred pence ?”

“Tell that for a tale ! You can get that little lot for the asking ; you’ve only got to tip the wink to one of the old gent’s lawyers, and he’ll give it you right away.”

“When will you want the money ?”

“Let’s see—this is Tuesday. I shall want thirty or forty pounds to-morrow, and the rest on Friday ; and on Saturday I’ll start for America, and I swear to you I’ll never return.”

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"I can neither give you five hundred pounds by Friday nor thirty or forty pounds to-morrow. That being so, am I to take it that you propose to go with your tale to Inspector Felkin ? "

"Now, don't let's talk like that!—don't let's do it ! As I said, you've only got to ask for the money, and you'll get it."

"If I were to give you the money I doubt if you'd go to America, and I'm sure you wouldn't make a fresh start ; you're not that kind of creature. You'd spend the money ; then you'd come to me for more, taking it for granted that so long as I had some, or could get any, I'd give it you."

"For a nice young lady like you, there's a low opinion of human nature to have. Whatever makes you say a thing like that of me ? All I ask is that if I do you a good turn you'll do me another. You don't know how difficult it is for a chap like me to get a chance of making a fresh start, or you wouldn't be so cruel hard."

"Perhaps so. At any rate, we have come to that understanding of which you spoke, so now be so good as to take yourself off."

"But have we come to an understanding?—have we ? "

"Is there anything you wish to add, to make it clearer ? "

"What I want to know is, are you going to give me that money or aren't you ? "

"I understand what you want ; what I want is that

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you should understand that I refuse to say either yes or no."

"Then what is your game? What are you driving at? Is it time to get the cash you want?"

"I want you to go quickly."

"Oh, I'll go, fast enough even for you, to Inspector Felkin. They mayn't hang you; perhaps you're counting on that, but they'll give you penal servitude for life, as sure as you're standing there."

"Go—please."

"Before I do go we will come to an understanding—now you shall have it. You treat me as if I was dirt, as if you were something altogether superior—why, by God, my girl, I know you through and through. I saw you cramming the papers into the pockets of your dressing-gown; I saw you emptying the cash-box of all that was in it—low-down robbery was what you were after. And when the old gent came in and caught you, if ever there was murder on a face it was on yours; you saw that the only chance to keep him quiet was to kill him, and you meant to kill him; by God, I believe you were glad to have a chance of doing it. I'll swear that before a judge and jury. Don't you come trying to play no games with that dog."

In his growing excitement he had come closer to her. Boris, resenting his approach, probably affected also by his sudden agitation, began to growl. Retreating more precipitately than he had advanced, he continued to hurl denunciation at Elsie, who remained motionless.

"And, my girl, I'll hang you!—yes, I will! don't

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you make any error ! When I tell them the whole truth, in a court of justice, as I will do, you'll be shown as much mercy as you showed that old man. You won't find me so easy to silence. You keep a tight hold of that dog ! If you think you can use him to bully me, I'll put a bullet into him, by God I will ! I've warned you ! "

As is not infrequently the case where dogs are concerned, the man's excitement reacted on the animal. Possibly Boris supposed that the way in which the man had all at once raised his voice meant mischief, as, in fact, it did. He probably saw in this sudden vocal violence danger to Elsie. He began to leap and strain at the lead, growling defiance. He broke loose. The man stepped back. The dog dashed forward. The man raised his revolver and fired. Boris sprang at him with a yelp of rage. The man went backwards over the bank, and dropped, with a splash, into the lake below.

CHAPTER XVII

AFTERWARDS

THERE was the sound of the splash ; the ping of the shot ; then silence—curious silence. The shot was in evidence longest. The splash was heard, and died. The echoes of the shot seemed to linger in the air. It was odd how the splash had been heard, and died. Boris stood with his forepaws right on the edge of the bank, looking down at the water. Each moment Elsie expected that he would leap in. Each moment, also, she expected to hear the splash take a different form, as the man struggled to get out of the lake. But nothing happened. Boris did not move, continuing to look down, as if he could not make this business out at all. And no noise came from the lake.

Elsie put her hand up to her left shoulder. The bullet had struck her there ; the dog had gone unscathed. In passing through her sleeve it had seared her skin, burning so that she had to put up her hand to touch it. The sleeve was damp already. When she looked at her fingers she saw that they were stained. Stooping she wiped them on the grass. As she did so, Boris looked round. She went to

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him, and stood by his side, staring down at the water. It was motionless ; so far as she was able to perceive, not so much as a ripple disturbed its surface. Something was running in her head about "making a hole in the water." She was conscious of an absurd feeling that if she stared hard enough she might see the hole which had so recently been made. But there was nothing to be seen ; nothing, even, of those ever-widening circles which come of the dropping of a stone.

Boris glanced up at her. She had a notion that on his face there was an expression which said that this sudden evanishment of the man really was beyond his comprehension altogether. She moved her hand to touch his head—her left hand. Even the slight movement pained her so that she had to bite her lip to keep back an exclamation. The leather lead was in her right. Slipping it through his collar, she whispered :

"Come, Boris ! "

It seemed to her, as his eyes met hers, that in his was surprise, as if he wondered at her haste. But she paid no attention to it, if there was. She began to walk away ; and the dog walked with her. And, presently, they left the lake behind. They had not, however, gone far before again her nostrils were greeted by the scent of tobacco. Glancing up she saw that a masculine figure was sauntering towards them along the path. That it was a friend of Boris' was made plain by his evident desire to be allowed to advance and greet him. A voice saluted her.

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"Hollo, Elsie, is that you—and Boris. What on earth was that row just now? Someone firing a revolver, and going dash-splash into the lake, at this time of night. Have you been treating Boris to a swim?"

It was Edwin Harmar, coming home. Giving Boris his heart's desire, the dog rushed forward to meet him. Harmar felt his coat.

"Apparently, old man, you haven't been having a bath. Then who has—eh, Elsie? It sounded as if someone had gone splashing into the water; I heard it as I was coming down the drive."

The girl treated his inquiry as if it had not been put.

"Clare didn't know when you were coming home, so she went to bed; and Boris and I came out for a walk."

"Quite right, too; just the night for a walk; isn't it lovely? I wonder who it was went tumbling into the lake."

"We've come round by the fishpond; perhaps you heard me throwing something in."

"You threw in something pretty big if I did; something that made a thundering row. And how about the revolver shot; did you fire that?"

"Perhaps you heard me cracking Boris's lead."

One end of the lead was a dog-whip. She snapped it in the air, smartly, producing a sound which might have been mistaken, by someone who had not seen how it had been caused, for the report of a

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pistol. He seemed willing to take it for granted that that was what he had heard.

"It might have been you and the whip ; yet I thought I knew the sound of a revolver as well as any man."

He had turned when she had reached him ; the pair were walking side by side, with Boris a step or two in front. They were still for a second or two, then he said, with that slight drawl in his speech, which Elsie sometimes thought was a trick he cultivated when he wished to be taken as less in earnest than he actually was :

"It's lucky my meeting you like this. I've wanted to have a quiet chat with you for some days, but you've managed to fend me off."

"It was done unconsciously if I did."

"If that's so, unconsciousness serves you uncommonly well."

Taking his cigar from his mouth he examined the ash.

"I've always thought that you were a girl in a million."

"I've always thought that I was one of many millions."

"Yes; no doubt ; but that's not what I meant, as you know. The average girl's a fool ; you're not."

"What's coming ?"

"I dined to-night with Rupert Earle, and from what he told me you appear to be treating him uncommonly badly ; that's what's coming."

"Has Mr. Earle commissioned you to say that ?"

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"Not a bit of it, as again you know."

"Then I don't intend to allow you to comment, on your own initiative, on how I treat Mr. Earle, or Mr. Anybody else ; thank you very much."

"Rupert Earle is the best fellow that ever lived ; he has never done a thing of which he has cause to be ashamed in his life ; and if you really suppose he has you're not the kind of girl I took you for."

"I'm not aware that I wished you to take me for any particular kind of girl."

"You seem to have got it all wrong about what happened that night, so I'll tell you exactly what did take place ; at least so far as we three were concerned —Palgrave, Earle, and myself."

"Edwin, if you make a single reference to that horrible night I'll run away from you as fast as ever I can. I've avoided you because I've felt that you wanted to talk about it, and I won't be made to listen."

"But you can't want to punish a man for what he never did, especially a man who worships the ground you stand on—you can't be that sort of girl."

"I'm beginning to be sorry that you did meet me. Please let's walk a little faster ; and do let's talk of something else. Don't you think there's going to be a change in the weather ?"

"Elsie, I've been a fool, and something worse, and if my folly's going to spoil Earle's life, by estranging him from you, I may as well commit suicide straight

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off, because I'll never forgive myself. All I want to tell you is that I'm to blame for everything that happened."

"Edwin, let me tell you something. It's because I understand better, perhaps, than you ever will, that when you, or others, speak of that—that night, it's as though something were being driven into my heart, so that it's all I can do to keep myself from screaming."

"It's plain, if you talk like that, that you don't understand."

"Edwin, am I to run ?"

"Elsie ! "

As if fearful that she would put her threat into execution he caught her by the arm. An exclamation broke from her, which was very like a cry of pain.

"My arm ! "

As he released her she went staggering across the path, until she gained the support of a trunk of a tree. He stared at her in amazement. Boris, turning, regarded them with inquiring eyes, as one who would have asked what was the matter.

"Elsie," exclaimed Mr. Harmar, "what's wrong with your arm ? Your sleeve's all wet. I do believe my hand's covered with blood ! Elsie, what's happened to your arm ? "

The girl was leaning against the tree, as if she needed its support to help her stand. There was a catch in her voice when she spoke.

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"I must have hurt it as I was—coming round the lake."

"But how can you have hurt it—to that extent? Why, you must be bleeding like a pig—my hand's all bloody! Elsie, that was a revolver shot I heard. Who fired it?"

"I wish I'd never met you."

Something in her words and manner, impressed him to the point of keeping him silent. For several seconds neither of them spoke. Then he did what she had done, when she had first made the discovery that her sleeve was wet—he stooped and wiped his hand upon the grass. When he rose his attitude towards her was one of less familiarity; his speech was more ceremonious.

"I beg your pardon if I've said, or done, anything to cause you to suppose that I wished in any way to trespass on your confidence. Shall I come with you to the house, or would you rather go alone?"

"Would you mind taking Boris to the stable?"

"With pleasure. Come along, old man. If your arm worries you, hadn't you better attend to it?"

"I'm going straight in. Don't wait—I'll be all right—I'll follow."

The fact was that she wished to make sure that he went with the dog in the direction of the stable, and not back again towards the fishpond.

Mr. Harmar said to Boris, as together they walked towards the stable-yard, and as he spoke his face was lighted by a whimsical smile:

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"I'm sometimes inclined to think that it's a pity, old man, that dogs can't talk ; you might be able to throw some light on that mysterious young lady's mysterious proceedings." Then, as by an afterthought, laughing, he patted Boris's head. "But then, of course, as you're a gentleman, even if you could talk you'd tell no tales."

CHAPTER XVIII

"TING-LING-LING-LING"

IT was not a pretty place which the bullet had made on Miss Grahame's shoulder—actually it was on the fleshy part of the arm where the humerus joins the shoulder blade. It showed out conspicuously on the girl's delicate white skin. When, in the solitude of her own bedroom, she removed her bodice and saw it, the sight made her turn a little faint. Although it was only a superficial flesh wound it hurt terribly. Having dressed it at her wash-stand with cold water she bound it as well as she might with a strip of linen, holding one end in her teeth, and drawing it round and round with her right hand, as tightly as she could. She was conscious that the pain might keep her wakeful—as if it were necessary that anything else should do that since she had brought with her to her sleeping chamber that which banished sleep.

When she had dressed her shoulder she had a mind to put on another bodice and go back to the fishpond—even now it might not be too late. He might be lying somewhere on the bank, in need or those offices which win back the partially drowned to life. How it haunted her, that fishpond ; how plainly

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she could see it—now ; how clearly she could hear the splash—even the silence which followed ; that inexplicable silence. Why had she not stayed to render to a wretched man the services which were dictated by the commonest humanity ? If she had sent Boris in after him, he would certainly have brought him out, dead or alive. Why had she attached the lead to the dog's collar, and brought him away with her, and left him in the silence ?

What had happened to the man ? How deep was the pond, just there, so close to the bank ? At that point the bank sank, in a sheer descent, some twelve or thirteen feet to the water. It was possibly the height which had been the chief cause of the mischief ; falling from such a distance, stunned by the violence with which he had struck the water, he had sunk like a stone, never to rise again. Possibly, too, the bed of the pond there was not earth but mud ; or covered with a thick growth of weeds. There must be some simple explanation of the silence which had followed. She had always understood that a drowning person rose three times to the surface ; he certainly had not risen once ; she had waited for him to rise. How long, in fact, had she waited ? Five minutes ?—four ?—three ? She was quite sure that she had waited long enough for him to rise at least once—if he meant to rise. Since he had not risen, what ought she to have done ?

She knew very well what she ought to have done. Because she had not done it she had banished sleep.

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At any rate, it was all over now. She would not go back. She remembered something which the man himself had said that afternoon. What was the use of making a fuss about spilt milk—if the milk was spilt? What was the use? With compressed lips and rigid eyes she began to undress, and prepare for bed. Each garment she took off seemed to cause a pang of pain to shoot right through her. But, eventually, she blew out the candle, and got between the sheets, settling herself on her right side. Her shoulder seemed to be hurting her each moment more and more.

She would have counted herself fortunate if mere intensity of pain could have kept her from thinking. But for some malign reason suffering seemed to make her brain more active; her imagination more vivid. Then, in the darkness, the events of the night, and of the day, were acted before her over and over again. Whether her eyes were open or closed it was the same; she could not shut them out—so that her mental anguish was greater far than her physical. The questions which forced themselves upon her, compelling from her an answer—which she could not give!

The question which recurred to her time after time was—how had Boris come to get loose from his lead? Had she let him go of deliberate intent? Or, his strength being greater than hers, had he broken away from her, because he was too much to hold? She knew that she had let him go. It was true that he had strained, and leaped, and nearly dragged her over; but she might have maintained her hold, had she been set

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on it ; or, if she had chided him, he would have ceased to strain. No ; any attempt to hide from herself the truth on that point was vain. The lead was attached to his collar by a spring ; she had pressed the spring, and the dog had gone. The vituperation with which the fellow had assailed her had made her all red hot. Had she been a man she would have assailed him with her own hands ; being a girl she had used the dog instead.

It was useless to try self-deception, then ; she knew perfectly well that her desire, and her intention, had been to punish the man. She had cared nothing for the consequences. She had risked the dog's life ; the bullet which had struck her had been meant for him ; it was not strange that in the suddenness of it all the fellow had missed his aim. She was not sure, as she lay there thinking—against her will—that he was not entitled to shoot. He had a right to do something in self-defence ; what else could he have done ? No ordinary stick would have availed. She knew Boris. Had the fellow struck him the probabilities were that, without doing him any material hurt, he would only have increased the dog's rage. Boris, really in a rage, was dangerous indeed. Against his fury a stick of any sort would have been as nothing. The fellow would have fared badly if he had struck him ; even she might not have been able to save him then.

More ; she had meant all along to use Boris as a weapon of offence. As she lay, and reflections came crowding on her, she knew it perfectly well. Familiar

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with his dislike to doubtful-looking strangers, she had freed him from his chain with the thought at the back of her head that, with his aid, she could bring the fellow to book. And she had brought him to book, as she had designed all along that she would do. Even, somewhere at the back of her brain, there had lurked the possibility of exactly what had happened. Knowing that he would be where he was, she had foreseen that, if Boris was there, he might very easily fall into the lake.

And he had fallen ; and there had been the splash, and then silence. How the sound of the splash was in her ears, and the tenseness of the silence ! If only something would disturb the stillness of the night ! She was a fool to put out the candle. Its light would have been something. She might have read. Read ? She had not been able to read since—since her uncle died. Why must she think of that ? If only she could stop thinking ! She would—she would banish thought. She believed herself to have a fairly strong will ; she would use it to put thought from her. She would refuse to allow anything to occupy her mind. She must be tired, she was sure she was ; so tired ! She would concentrate all her efforts on an attempt to sleep.

All at once—what was that ? She gave such a sudden start in bed that a moan broke from her, before she knew it, because of the twist she had given her shoulder. What was it she had heard ? She had wished the stillness might be broken ; and it had been—by what ? A bell ? Was it a bell ?

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She had raised herself on her right elbow, straining her ears. She held her breath, lest she should lose the faintest sound. Could she have seen herself she would have known that her cheeks were almost as white as her nightdress, and that her eyes were dilated. Was it a bell ?

There !—it came again ! What it was, this time, was unmistakable. Ting-ling-ling-ling ! It was the telephone ; the bell was ringing ; someone was calling them up. What time could it be ? Who could be calling up Timberham at that hour of the night ? It had been the invariable custom, in her uncle's time, to disconnect the telephone at night ; so far as she knew the custom had been continued. By what inadvertence had the practice been omitted to-night ?

Ting-ling-ling-ling ! The bell continued to ring without cessation. A moment's reflection told her that probably after all it was not so very late. She could not have been upstairs so very long. Probably when she retired the night had been yet young. Apparently whoever called was persistent ; intending to keep on ringing until notice was taken. Hers was the nearest occupied bedroom to the library. The servants were at a distance ; Clare and Edwin were in the other wing. The chances were that she was the only one whom the bell had roused. Dare she go to learn who the caller was ? Rather, dare she not go ?

She slid out of bed. Fumbling with the matches

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before she could get one to strike, she lit the candle. How the bell kept on ! Why had not whoever was at the other end a little patience ? What was the sense of keeping up such a persistent ringing ? She could not find her slippers. When she had thrust her pink feet into them she had a notion that someone was moving about the house—and became conscious of her overwhelming anxiety to be the first to answer the telephone call. Feverishly donning her dressing-gown, heedless of the pain she caused herself by passing her left arm through its sleeve ; snatching up the candlestick ; opening the door ; she went out, on to the landing—and listened.

She had been mistaken ; her fancy had played her a trick ; no one was moving in the house. All was still, save for the twittering discord of that persistent bell. She looked over the banister into the hall below. How dark it was ! She had not gone down into that darkness since—the night her uncle died. That bell was calling her to the room in which—he had died. At the thought she drew a little back. She was more reluctant to descend. Only the fear that the bell might be heard by others before she had learned who called dragged her down.

She went down slowly, stair by stair, looking behind, in front, on either side of her, each step she took ; she who was wont to fly down those stairs so carelessly. At the foot she paused, fearful to advance, not daring to retreat. The library door was just

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ajar, as it had been, she remembered, on that night—just in this fashion, then, had she come down the stairs. Suppose—what was the use of supposing? That way madness lay. Giving a quick step forward, she pushed the door wide open. The room was empty—she had known that it was empty. Yet, as holding the candle above her head, she searched it everywhere, it was with a great sigh of relief that she saw that no one was inside.

Moving rapidly across the room, placing the candlestick upon the table, she caught up the receiver—it was something to have stopped that bell.

"Hullo!" she said.

There was in it so strange a quality that she did not recognise the sound of her own voice. But as a voice came back to her along the wire she was seized with such a fit of trembling that gripping, forgetfully, in her desire to steady herself, the edge of the table with her hand, she gave her poor arm such a wrench that she had to close the lids tightly over her eyes, and press her teeth into her lip, to get the better of her pain.

"Is that Timberham?"

She recognised the sound of that voice, though she had been as a stranger to her own, for it was to her as the voice of one speaking from the grave. And though it was not musical, nor pleasant, and was very far from being the voice of one she loved, it seemed to her, with her heart beating against her ribs, and her whole frame shaking, that it was the sweetest sound she had ever

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heard. For, unless her ears played her falser than they had ever done, or than she believed they ever would do, it was the voice of one for whose sake she had been enduring tortures, because she had supposed him to be lying at the bottom of the lake.

It was a moment or two before she could regain enough control of herself to speak at all ; and, when she did, her voice was all of a shiver.

“ It—it’s I, El—Elsie Grahame.”

There came back a full-mouthed objurgation which was proof positive that her voice had been recognised too.

“ By God, it is, you —— cat ! ”

There streamed through the receiver a flood of epithets from which at any other time she would have fled ; but then she did not seem to mind them at all. She merely regarded them as evidence that the man still lived, and that was all for which she cared. Presently the stream grew less, either because his stock began to be exhausted, or because he thought that he had done enough for the occasion. Apparently, also, a sudden doubt took hold of him.

“ Are you there ? ”

Probably he felt that after such an illustration of the capacities of bad language she might have ceased to be there. She proceeded at once to reassure him.

“ Oh, yes, I’m still here.”

“ Then mind you stop there until I’ve finished—d’ye hear ? You tried to murder me, you —— cat.”

“ You shot me—in the arm.”

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“ I wish I’d shot you in the heart, and the dog too—both, the pair of you ! If it wasn’t for the greatest fluke that ever was I’d be rotting at the bottom of that — lake ! ”

It was all she could do to keep from hysterical laughter. The revulsion in her feelings was so startling and complete that the evident fury which was in the speaker’s voice struck her as comical. The fact that she had left his remark unanswered seemed to renew his doubts.

“ Are you there ? ”

Again she reassured him.

“ Then you listen to me, and mind you do listen ! And mind you mark my words ! I’m going to have no more fooling about—now which is it to be ? Are you going to let me have that five hundred pounds ? ”

“ I am.”

“ You are ?—oh !—that’s it, is it ?—you are !—that’s the time of day ! Come to your senses, have you ? ”

“ Perhaps, now, you’ve earned it.”

In spite of herself a sound entered the receiver which, reaching him, moved him to fresh rage.

“ Laughing, are you, you — cat ! All right ; you laugh ! Go on laughing ! You wait a bit, perhaps it will be my turn to do the laughing before we’ve done—Ha, ha ! ”

The sound which reached her was so little like a laugh that it startled her.

“ If you’re treating this as a joke, my little pet, you’ll find that the joke’s a bad one. Am I or am I

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not to understand that you'll give me that five hundred ? ”

“ I've already told you that I will.”

“ Forty to-morrow ? ”

“ You shall have it.”

“ And the rest on Friday ? ”

“ To enable you to make a fresh start in the United States of America on Saturday—I quite understand.”

“ Still laughing, are you ? Keep it up—you're a nice little thing, I don't think ! Just you tell me, clear and straight, what you do understand, and what I'm to understand—about the coin, I mean.”

“ You're to understand that I will let you have forty pounds to-morrow, and the rest of the five hundred pounds on Friday—is that clear and straight ? ”

“ Oh quite, thank you. Is that a joke, or do you swear that that is what you'll do ? ”

“ It's not a joke, and I do swear that that is what I'll do.”

“ Good ! Then why the devil couldn't you talk sense before ? Now, just you listen. You'll have to send me that money to the address I'm going to give you ; there's some paper on that table, as I happen to know, so you write it down—Lionel Fitzherbert, Esquire—don't you forget the ‘ Esquire ’—21, Pearl Street, Soho, London. Got it ? Then just you read what you have got.”

While she held the receiver in one hand she had been scribbling with the other, on a scrap of paper, the address as it came from him. At his request she

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acquainted him, through the telephone, with what she had written. He was pleased to express his approval. After insisting on her reiterating the undertaking she had given, and charging her, evidently with all the earnestness he could command, to see that she carried it out in the smallest detail, he bade her what he probably meant as an ironical "Good-night, my darling!" and the conversation closed. Under normal circumstances she would have resented his familiarity with all her force; then it went unheeded. Disconnecting the instrument by laying the receiver down upon the table, she turned to leave the room, with a lighter step and a lighter heart than she had entered.

As she was passing through the doorway she heard someone moving in the hall; before she could withdraw Edwin Harmar stood before her, with his cap on, and a cane in his hand, as if he had just entered the house. It would not have been easy to say which was the more surprised to see the other. She was the first to speak.

"Edwin—still up—and only just come in! Why, whatever time can it be? I thought you were upstairs hours ago."

She was conscious that he was looking her up and down with something in his glance which she instinctively resented.

"Did you? It's not so very late. Like you, I've been for a stroll round the fishpond."

There was a tone in his voice which laid stress on the curious look in his eyes.

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"Did you take Boris with you?"

"No; I chained him up. I had a sort of feeling that you wanted me to chain him up."

"Have you been by the fishpond all this time?"

"Mostly. What have you been doing in the library in that charming rig-out? You look as if you had already been to bed."

"I've been to fetch something."

She showed him the scrap of paper on which she had written the address.

"I see—I presume it's something rather important, which wouldn't wait for the morning, or you would hardly have left your comfy bed to come and fetch it. By the way, I found two rather funny things by the fishpond, near the summer-house; one was on the top of the bank, and the other just over the edge. One was a revolver, a single chamber of which had been recently discharged; the other was a briar pipe, with the bowl still warm. No one was in sight. I waited for the owner to appear, but he never came. Rather odd that anyone should have gone off, and left behind—especially just where I found them—two such very personal belongings."

He held out a revolver and a pipe for her to see.

CHAPTER XIX

IN QUEST OF FIVE HUNDRED POUNDS

ELSIE found Clare in the morning room, writing letters. Miss Grahame had breakfasted in bed off a cup of tea and a slice of toast. Though her arm had become appreciably less painful it still smarted. She would have carried it in a sling had she not wished to avoid curious inquiries. She had already found that she was apt to be forgetful, and that each time she moved it inadvertently the result was a nasty twinge. But she had decided that she would rather endure that than be subjected, if she could help it, to cross-examination. She wondered, as she entered the morning room, how much Edwin Harmar had told his wife. If he had said anything about her arm Clare's cue, apparently, was to allow the first reference to come from her. She looked round casually as Elsie appeared, then went on writing.

"Well, my dear child, how goes it?"

That was the only remark she made. Elsie trifled with some books and papers which were on a little table as she watched her cousin's pen go flying on. Presently she asked a question :

"Am I interrupting you?"

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"Well—I've got some letters to write—but they'll keep."

"I wanted to talk to you about what you were saying yesterday—you know—that paper you wished me to sign."

Clare spun quickly round.

"I'm not at all too much engaged not to be ready to talk to you about that. Here's the sort of thing I mean—Edwin drew it up, at my particular request, before he went out."

"Has Edwin gone out?"

"Early, he said he had to go; I don't know why—and he's going to be away all day. These men!"

Elsie was examining the paper Clare had given her.

"I don't understand this very well, but I see it says something about ten thousand pounds."

"My dear, we've both of us got to sign that paper—it's an authorisation and an assurance both in one. By it we agree to indemnify those lawyer people against any bad consequences which may come from their giving us ten thousand pounds of our own money. I don't understand much better than you do, but, according to Edwin, that's what it amounts to."

"When shall you get the money?"

"If Edwin takes the paper up to town to-morrow, which is Thursday, maybe they'll condescend to let us have the coin next week."

"Next week? But—Clare, can you let me have forty pounds to-day?"

"My dear child, Edwin and I haven't five pounds in

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hard cash between us—it's a fact. We're absolutely stoney, and all my money he's got. I don't mind admitting to you that I haven't five shillings in my purse. Not only so, but if we don't get that coin next week we shall be in an appalling hole. We shall have to get it from someone somehow, and that's the truth."

"I must have forty pounds to-day!"

"Elsie!—whatever for? You told me yesterday you didn't owe more than ten pounds in the world."

"I must not only have forty pounds to-night, but I must also have the difference between that and five hundred pounds by Friday."

"But, my dearest, I don't understand—you were talking yesterday as if you would never want any money at all."

"Clare, are you quite sure that you can't let me have forty pounds—now?"

"Elsie!—what do you mean? Do you suppose that if I could I'd tell you I couldn't? If it isn't too great a secret, could you give me some notion what it's wanted for?"

"What difference would that make?"

"None, I confess. Only, really, Elsie, your manner is so strange you almost frighten me. I do hope you're not in a hole. Yesterday afternoon you were talking as if money were something altogether beneath your notice, yet now you're asking me for forty pounds as if you were holding a pistol to my head."

"Clare, can't you suggest some way by which I can get at five hundred pounds by Friday?"

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"You might go up to town yourself and ask them for it. The situation really is ridiculous. Here's all uncle's money left to one of us, and we're both of us penniless. If you were to ask them for five hundred pounds I should imagine they'd hardly refuse to let you have it, on the nail."

"Who am I to ask ? Mr. Lazarus and Co. ? No, thank you. I'm not going to ask them for any of that money of which I've sworn that I wouldn't touch a farthing."

"Was anyone so unreasonable ? Is the girl insane ? What money do you suppose you're going to get, if you won't have that ?"

"Give me a pen ; I'll sign this paper of yours."

"My dear child, do go slowly ! How you jump about ! You'll want a witness. Edwin said that he thought our signatures ought to be witnessed."

"Ring the bell ; one of the servants will do."

Regarding her cousin with arched eyebrows, as it she was strongly of opinion that something must be seriously wrong with her, Mrs. Harmar did her bidding, and rang the bell. Tyrrell appeared. Miss Grahame, who had seated herself at the davenport at which Mrs. Harmar had just been writing, explained what was required.

"Tyrrell, I want you to witness my signature."

While she was attaching her name to the paper in her small, clear, firm, characteristic handwriting, Mrs. Harmar got in her word.

"And mine, Tyrrell."

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When the paper had been signed and witnessed, and Tyrrell had gone, Miss Grahame made as if to follow him, turning as she went.

"Is there anything else you want of me?"

"Nothing, at present, thank you. In what a tone you do ask, Elsie! Where are you going?"

"I am going to get that five hundred pounds."

Before her cousin could inquire where she proposed to seek for what, from the point of view of many people, was quite a comfortable little sum, Miss Grahame had quitted the room, leaving Mrs. Harmar with the paper which had just been signed and witnessed in her hand.

CHAPTER XX

MISS GRAHAME FINDS WHAT SHE SEEKS

THE vicarage was rather more than half a mile from Timberham. On the way to it one passed the church. Indeed, the church and the vicarage were adjacent, a fact which the Rev. Peter Menzies resented. While he admitted that the propinquity was not without its advantages, he declared that he objected strongly to the view of the churchyard which he got from his back windows, protesting that he had not the least desire to talk or think of graves, or worms or epitaphs. Miss Grahame felt, however, as she strolled past it that lovely forenoon that Woodcote churchyard was not without a charm of its own. The old church was half hidden among the trees. The graves and monuments were well kept; all about them was rich, green turf, and where there was no grass the place was radiant with flowers. The vicar spent as much money on the graveyard as on his own private grounds.

As Miss Grahame approached the curate was about to pass through the lych-gate. He stopped to greet her, proffering a piece of information with that air of curious, even conscious austerity, which half repelled and half amused her.

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“ This, Miss Grahame, is St. Brigit’s day.”

“ Indeed, Mr. Pattison, is that so ? And who was St. Brigit ? ”

She was convinced that he could not really be so shocked as his bearing suggested.

“ St. Brigit, Miss Grahame, was one of our holiest female saints. I grieve to learn that you did not know it. Yet I fear I cannot be surprised, since the vicar himself asked me an exactly similar question. The festivals, Miss Grahame, of our saints and martyrs are holy days, and should be observed as holy days, certainly by some form of service in our parish churches. I am about to hold such a service now. It will be very brief. Will you not come in ? Save Laura—I should say, Miss Menzies—you will be the only member of the congregation. Yours will be a privilege.”

Miss Grahame declined ; she said she wished to see the vicar. The curate passed along the winding path which led to the vestry, holding himself a little more austere, perhaps, because of the discomposure he had shown when he had spoken of the vicar’s sister by her Christian name. Miss Grahame turned into the vicarage garden—to be greeted with a shout of welcome by the vicar.

One of the latest additions to the vicarage grounds was a putting green, for clock golf. It was at the foot of a slope. The vicar was on it, with a wooden putter in his hands, about to address a ball, when, hearing the click of the gate, he looked up and, seeing her enter, hailed her. She went down to him.

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"Have you seen Pattison?" he asked, offering no more ceremonious greeting.

"He's just gone into the church."

"Yes; I asked him to have half a dozen rounds with me, or even one—his putting's worse than mine; it's painful! painful! And what do you think he said? He said it was St. Brigit's day; and when I asked him who St. Brigit was he looked as if I'd hit him with the putter. Do you know he wants to hang up a list of the saints and martyrs in the church porch, and have a service for every one of them. When I pointed out that that would practically mean having a service every day and all day, he said that in the ideal church that was how it ought to be. The man's impossible!"

The vicar wiped his brow with his handkerchief, as if something had made him warm.

"Just now I went round in one over; that's taking bogey as twenty-four. With practice I believe I could do it in twenty-four three times out of five. But putting's not everything at golf. With a proper amount of practice I might do something; as it is, I haven't even got a handicap, and I never shall have while I'm vicar of Woodcote. Have you come to see Laura? Because, if so, she's in the church assisting Pattison to hold a service for St. Brigit—and, do you know, in that woman there's the making of quite a decent golfer."

"I haven't come to see Laura; I've come to see you."

"To see me? That—that's very good of you."

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A look of wonder came on his round honest face.

"I've come to talk to you about what you were saying yesterday afternoon."

The wonder changed to anxiety.

"Don't—don't you be in any hurry to do that. As I told you, I want you to take plenty of time to think it over ; I don't want to press you in any way."

"You are not pressing me ; I have thought it over, and I've decided. Don't you want to know what my decision is ? "

"Of course I do, only—only you don't know how much this means to me. Can't I get you a chair ? There are some on the tennis lawn."

"Thank you ; I think I'd rather sit on the grass. Before I say anything else, I want to ask you to do me a favour."

"I'll do it, if it's anything a man like me can do."

"It's a strange thing for a girl to ask of a man."

"The stranger it is the gladder I'll be to do it. Try ! "

"I want you to give me five hundred pounds."

An expression came on to his features which it would not have been easy to diagnose ; one in which at any rate perplexity had a considerable place.

"Is that all ? " he asked.

"Do you mean is that all I want you to give me, or all I have to say ? It's not all I have to say, if you will give me the money."

"If !—don't be so ridiculous !—as if you had a moment's doubt. I'll give you a cheque at once."

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"I'm afraid a cheque won't do ; I want bank notes."

"Good—you shall have 'em ! I'll send my man over to the bank with instructions to return with the cash inside two hours—if you'll just wait while I go in and draw the cheque."

When he returned he found her still sitting on the grass, with a look on her face such as some martyr might have worn who had formed some lofty and self-denying resolution. With apparent obliviousness of the fact that there was anything unusual about the young lady, the vicar, picking up his club, proposed that they should measure strength.

"I've sent Atkins, but let him go as fast as he pleases, we shall have time for two or three rounds before he's back. I've got all sorts of putters—wood, iron, brass, aluminium—which do you prefer ? Are you any good on the greens ?"

"I hardly know. I fancy that my opportunities to play have been even fewer than yours."

"But you're fond of golf ?"

"I think I should be fond of all games if I had the chance of playing them, but, in my case, the chance has always been wanting."

"The same with me—extraordinary, how alike we are—extraordinary ! What chance have I to play anything ?—a man in my position !—especially with a curate who thinks I ought to hold services every day and all day long. I shouldn't wonder if, before long, that man starts trying to rob me of my nights ! Come—and see by how much you can beat me."

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"If you don't mind I'd rather not play just now ; I'd sooner talk."

"Can't you talk while you're playing ?"

"I'm afraid not. I shall find it hard enough to say what I have to say anyhow ; it would be still harder if I had to say it while I was doing my best not to let you beat me by too many strokes. When you asked me just now if that was all, did you mean that you thought that I ought to give you some notion of what I wanted the money for ?"

"Not a bit of it ; don't you be under any such delusion. I not only don't want you to tell me, but I'd rather not know. Strictly between ourselves, I shouldn't care if you were to twist the notes into spills, and set fire to them one after the other or all together, and throw away the ashes."

"You can't seriously wish me to believe that you'd like a person to be your wife who could be guilty of such an act as that ?"

He looked at her with a comical glint in his eyes, then turning, lightly struck a golf ball.

"Don't talk to me about seriousness, after what I've been enduring from Pattison—please don't ! "

She smiled, though her mood had never been graver.

"Your hinting that you would not object to a wife of that, I can't help saying, rather curious kind places me in an invidious position, since I came for the express purpose of telling you that if you would like me to be your wife I will."

"Do—do you really mean that ?"

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"I hope you won't mind my being serious to the extent of saying that I really do."

"Don't you poke fun at me, it—it isn't fair. I can't properly thank you now; words always do fail me when I want them most. I don't at all agree that what the heart feels the mouth speaks—the more I feel the less I'm able to say; but—but perhaps I shall be able to thank you some day—I'll try. But there's one point on which we must have an understanding, now. Do you think you'd like to try how you'd like to be a vicar's wife?"

"I don't—I'm sure I wouldn't, without trying."

"You wouldn't?"

"I'm very sorry, but I'm afraid I shouldn't."

"You needn't be sorry; don't you be sorry. In the strictest confidence, after what passed between us yesterday afternoon, I was rather afraid you would. Laura seems to have got some idea into her head that it's nice to be a vicar's wife; I was fearful that she might have managed to pass it on to you. Of course, as things are, I shall resign the living."

"I should prefer that you should do so, if I am to be your wife."

"If she is to be my wife!—this is splendid!—if she is to be my wife!—I shall present Pattison."

Miss Grahame said nothing. She remembered what Miss Menzies had said about the patronage of the living being given as a wedding present to her. Seeing nothing peculiar in the girl's silence the vicar continued.

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"I shall go the whole hog ; half measures will be of no manner of use. I shall not only resign the living, I shall give up Orders altogether. I shall unfrock myself—I don't know how it's done, but I shall. I'm not going through life as a 'reverend.'"

"I'd rather not be Mrs. Reverend."

"She'd rather not be Mrs. Reverend!—hark at her!—isn't she great? Now—now how long must we wait? By that I mean to say, what do you think is the shortest space of time in which you could bring yourself to the sticking point?—that is, couldn't you fix a date?—the earliest?"

"So far as I'm concerned, there are reasons why I would rather not wait at all."

"Not wait at all?—reasons, are there? This is greater and greater! Now, what might you mean by not wait at all?"

"Precisely what I say. I hope you won't think too badly of me, but—could we be married, say, in a fortnight?"

"In a fortnight! Could we be married! I say, Elsie—you won't mind my calling you Elsie?"

"I believe it is the custom for a girl to be called by her Christian name by the man she is going to marry."

"Man she's going to marry!—that's me! oh, this is altogether beyond anything! Would you mind calling me Peter?"

"I'll try, Peter."

"I never knew the name could sound so sweetly.

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My father would call me Peter, he told me himself, because he wanted me to be like a rock. I don't know what kind of rock; there's nothing rocky about me."

"You understand that I not only have no money but I never shall have any. I haven't even enough money to buy a trousseau."

"If you'd mentioned that before we might have made that five hundred pounds a thousand; will five hundred pounds' worth of clothes do for you to start with?"

"Mr. Menzies! I beg your pardon! I mean Peter."

"Then if you mean it, say it. Please say what you mean. Say it again."

"Peter."

"My father was wiser than I thought; your lips make music of the name. I'd like you to understand that I don't want you to spend any paltry two hundred a year on your clothes; I'm richer than you've any notion of; that makes my being vicar of Woodcote so absurd. I want all your clothes to be sweet, dainty, and lovely; I want you to buy everything you see in the fashion plates and all the things you see in the shop windows."

"I presume that depends upon the window. Some of the things you see in some of the shop windows are rather —, aren't they?"

"I suppose they are, when you come to think of it. All I want is that you should have everything

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you want ; there it is, in a nutshell. So that's settled ; we're to be married in a fortnight."

"Would you mind not announcing it from the housetops ?"

"How do you mean ?"

"I'll tell Laura, and Laura can tell whom she likes ; but I don't propose to tell Mr. and Mrs. Harmar till it suits me, and that mayn't be till the last moment."

"Don't tell them at all, if you like, till afterwards ; let's make a sort of runaway match of it. I don't care what you say or do—or don't say, or don't do—as long as you'll be my wife. My wife !—my head goes round at the thought of it !—if you only knew the dreams I've had ! Marriage in a fortnight ; how about the honeymoon ? Couldn't we do something larky ? I beg your pardon, but there's another point—half the words which Tom, Dick, and Harry use are forbidden to parsons. Now I've a natural predilection for slang ; it's alive ! All young people use slang ; it's a sign of youth. When men, or women either, begin to object to the use of slang it's a sign that they're approaching the fossil age. I've noticed it. I hope you won't object to my using slang, in moderation, when I'm out of Orders ?"

"You may use it in immoderation, if you like. I'll accord you that liberty which you are willing to accord me, and more."

"Elsie, you're a brick—that is, you will be a brick when I cease to be a vicar. Just now you're all that a young lady who is engaged to a man who is at present

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a vicar ought to be. Now what's your idea of what a honeymoon should be like?"

"What's my idea of what a honeymoon should be like?"

As she echoed his words she looked away. A mist came before her eyes. It was a second or two before she spoke again.

"I leave all that sort of thing to you. Do with me exactly as you will."

For some reason he picked up the putter which he had dropped and struck a ball with it with as much force as if it had been a driver.

When Miss Grahame left the vicarage she had five hundred pounds in bank-notes inside her blouse. Meeting Miss Menzies at the churchyard gate she conveyed to her the news in the first words she uttered.

"I've just promised to marry your brother."

"Elsie!—you don't say!"

Miss Menzies regarded her steadily; as if she were looking for something on her face.

"You've your own way of telling the news. Will it be very much against the grain?"

"It will be so little against the grain that I've asked him, as a special favour to me, to marry me in a fortnight."

"In a fortnight!—Elsie!—are you raving?"

"Peter didn't seem to think I was."

"Peter!—so it's got to Peter!"

"Isn't it the custom for a girl to call the man she's going to marry by his Christian name? So far from thinking me raving, Peter seemed to be quite willing."

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"Oh, I don't doubt it ! Peter'd marry you inside ten minutes if he could."

"I believe he would."

"With me it's not mere belief, it's conviction ; I know. But there's no reason why you should be mad if he is. You ought to know that before your wedding day there are ten thousand things which must be thought of."

"Peter seems to have made up his mind on one point ; he already talks of presenting Mr. Pattison to the living."

"Does he ? I'm going to do some talking first. I'll go and talk to him at once. And this afternoon Mr. Pattison shall make the position clear to him. Peter is going to present me with the living, and I'm going to present Sholto to it. My dear Elsie, it's clearer to me than ever that I must be the dominant partner. Sholto's been holding a service in honour of St. Brigit, with me for his whole congregation. When he'd gone on for more than half an hour I asked him if he didn't think that that was enough."

"You didn't !"

"Certainly I did. He looked at me ; but he never said a word."

"My dear Laura, you surely didn't expect him to carry on a conversation, or, worse still, an argument, with his congregation in the middle of a service ?"

"Under the circumstances I emphatically expected him to speak to me, as I shall give him to understand when we meet. He paid no attention whatever to my

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question, but went on with what he called his service. However, I was even with him. Directly he started again I got up and left the church. I'm curious to know how long he'll keep it up all by himself."

When Elsie reached Timberham, Tyrrell came to her in the hall with such promptness that it was plain that he had been awaiting her approach.

"Can I speak to you in private for one minute, Miss Grahame?"

Tyrrell's appearance synchronised so nearly with her entrance that it was not strange she looked the surprise she felt.

"Certainly, Tyrrell. What is it you wish to say? Can't you speak to me here?"

"I would much rather speak to you in the drawing-room, miss, if you don't mind."

He held the drawing-room door invitingly open. She passed through; he followed. So soon as he was in he took something from inside his coat.

"I found this envelope, Miss Grahame."

He held it out to her. She needed no second glance to tell her what it was. It was the envelope which she had found in the oak; which she had slipped into the copper vase when she went out to see Miss Menzies; which had vanished when she returned. She looked the butler very straight in the face; he met her glance without showing any sign of confusion.

"You found it?" She laid a stress upon the verb.
"Pray, where?"

"In the garden, miss."

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"In the garden, Tyrrell? How very droll! In what part of the garden?"

"Under the azalea which is near the library window."

"What an odd place for it to be!"

She took the envelope from him; he being apparently unconscious of the irony which was in her tone, and words, and manner. She turned it over and over. One felt, when she spoke again, that her intention was that each syllable she uttered should bite him as if it had been oil of vitriol.

"It's empty."

"Empty; as I found it."

"You are quite sure, Tyrrell, that it was empty when you found it?"

"Quite sure. I saw that outside it was written 'My Will' in master's writing; so I thought that, though it was empty, you might like to see it."

"That was very good of you. Only—it's not of much interest if it's empty, is it?"

"That I can't say."

"Tyrrell, please be careful, and think, before you answer. Once more, are you certain that you found this envelope in the garden?"

"I am."

"And not in the library?"

"Not in the library."

"And that when you found it it was empty?"

"It was exactly as it is now. I don't know if you've got it in your mind, miss, that it wasn't empty when I found it; I don't know why you

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should have. I believe, miss, that I'm nearly as anxious to find the missing will as you are, so that when I found the envelope was empty it gave me quite a shock."

"Did it? I hope you've recovered from it, Tyrrell."

The butler turned to leave the room.

"Stay! What time was it when you found this?"

He mentioned a time when a moment's reflection told her that she was probably actually talking to Miss Menzies. If the thing were possible she eyed him more keenly still.

"If that was the case, why haven't you given it me before?"

"I thought you'd sooner I gave it to you in private, and this is the first opportunity I've had I've been waiting for a chance to give it you all the morning."

"Was there anyone in the library when you found it?"

For the first time he showed signs of hesitation.

"There might have been."

"There might have been? Might Mrs. Harmar have been there?"

Again a momentary hesitation. His manner became, all at once, a trifle dogged.

"She might have been."

Miss Grahame's eyes left Tyrrell's face. She turned aside. Her tone became more casual.

"You didn't see the envelope come through the window?"

THE INTERRUPTED KISS

"No miss, I did not"—then he added, as if reluctantly—"but Mrs. Harmar saw me pass the window just before I found it."

"Thank you, Tyrrell; that will do. I won't keep you any longer."

A few minutes later Miss Grahame was in her bedroom when Mrs. Harmar entered.

"Elsie," she began, "I've thought of a way by which you might get that five hundred pounds since I saw you last. Who on earth do you know in this out of the way corner of the world who'll hand you such a sum merely for the asking?"

"I'm afraid, for the moment, that that's my secret. Do you remember my asking you yesterday afternoon if you'd seen an envelope in the library?"

"I have a dim recollection of your persistently worrying me with some silly question of the kind."

"When you went in the library, did you notice Tyrrell pass the window?"

"Elsie, are you starting all over again? Why on earth should I notice such a trifle as that?"

"Well, it's rather odd. You were in the library when Tyrrell passed the window, and just outside the window was the envelope in question. Here it is. When Tyrrell found it, it was empty, yet you'll observe that written on it in uncle's handwriting are two rather significant words—'My Will.'"

Mrs. Harmar drew back from the envelope which Elsie held out to her as if she were afraid it would bite.

CHAPTER XXI

RUPERT EARLE CLEARS A CHEQUE

"MRS. MORRIS, it's been cleared."

Mr. Rupert Earle made this announcement nearly at the top of his voice as he burst into his landlady's own particular sanctum. Mr. Earle lodged in Kite Street, Wandsworth. His landlady was an invalid, who spent a large part of her time in doing what she euphoniously called "homework for ladies." At that moment she was engaged on a gorgeous fancy waist-coat which was destined to adorn some unknown manly bosom. Her daughter, Susan, was putting the tea kettle on a small gas stove whose fumes were a trifle too obvious. Both ladies glanced up as though they wondered if the lodger were well; they were used to Mr. Earle's ebullient ways, or they might have been more anxious than they were.

"Mr. Earle," demanded Mrs. Morris, "whatever have you been doing now?"

"My dear Mrs. Morris, I've been doing nothing; what's still more singular, I haven't even been done, for once in a way. Don't I tell you it's been cleared?"

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"What's been cleared? What are you talking about?"

"Why, the cheque, Mrs. Morris, the cheque. A cheque made payable to Rupert Earle for one hundred thousand pounds has just been honoured; and you see standing before you an individual who, at this identical second, is the actual possessor of one hundred thousand golden sovereigns."

It was some time since Mrs. Morris had raised herself unaided from her chair, but she almost did it then.

"Mr. Earle, sir, are you mad?"

"No, Mrs. Morris, that's the most amazing part of it; I'm not mad, though I've seemed mad to heaps and heaps of people times without number. I shouldn't be surprised, Susan, if sometimes I've seemed mad even to you."

"There's no 'sometimes' about it; you've done it lots of times. That you're quite right in the upper storey I never shall believe."

"There you are! There's the voice of truth!—which is Susan! Holding that belief, would you be surprised to learn that I'm likely to turn out to be the sanest person you ever met?"

"I should."

"Good!—when in need of frankness go to Susan and you're bound to get it! You know that engine of mine?"

"I ought to; I've heard about it often enough."

"You're going to hear about it much more often,

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and so's the world—considering that I've just received one hundred thousand pounds on account of it."

Both ladies stared at him as if they thought that he really had gone mad.

"Mr. Earle," exclaimed Mrs. Morris, "you don't want us to believe that you've sold that invention of yours for all that money?"

"No, Mrs. Morris, I don't."

"I thought you didn't."

"You're quite correct ; I didn't. I've sold nothing, absolutely nothing ; but for what's called an 'option' to exercise certain rights I've received one hundred thousand pounds, and the engine's as much mine as ever it was. Less than two hours ago Mr. Silas P. Shaddock, of Pittsburg, drew, in his office, right in front of me, a cheque for one hundred thousand pounds as carelessly, as light-heartedly, as off-handedly, as you or I might write a note to the butcher, explaining that we propose to put off the payment of this week's bill."

"I never wrote such a note to any butcher in my life, of that I'm sure."

"Well, I have ; if not to a butcher, then to lots of other people. Of course I never gave myself away ; I sat in front of him with an air which was intended to convey the impression that if he made it a million it would make no difference to me. He wrote it out, signed it, blotted it, handed it across the table ; I took it as coolly as if I were in the habit of taking hundred thousand pound cheques every day

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of my life. ‘I see you’ve left it open,’ I observed. ‘I thought you’d rather have it that way,’ he replied, ‘so that if you like you can take it across the counter ; a hundred thousand pounds in hard cash makes quite a pretty pile.’ ‘I’ve noticed that it does,’ I said. He looked at me—oh how he looked at me ! He must have known I was joking ; don’t you think he must ?”

“ How am I to think at all, when I no more know what you’re talking about than the man in the moon ! ”

“ I went to the bank with the cheque in my waist-coat pocket—mind, a hundred thousand pound cheque in my waistcoat pocket ; I couldn’t have treated it more superciliously if it had been the return half of a third class ticket. When I got to the bank I planked it down on the counter. A cashier took it up—I felt as if I was going at the knees. I quite expected he’d throw something at me ; or have me thrown out ; or, at the very least, that he’d tear the cheque in two, with a remark to the effect that that was exactly what it was worth. But he did nothing of the sort ; what do you think he did do ? He said, just as you might ask me if I like sugar in my tea, ‘How will you take it ?’ I did my best to hide from him the fact that I was holding on to the edge of the counter to keep myself from falling to the floor ; but one of these days I mean to find out if that man was specially coached for the occasion. I explained to him that I didn’t want it at all ; that I wanted to leave it in the bank, if it was there to leave ; and that if he’d let me have a hundred pounds,

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just to show that it wasn't all make-believe, I'd be content."

Mr. Earle, drawing his tall figure to its full height, throwing back his shoulders, laughed as if in the enjoyment of the greatest joke in the world.

"So the cheque was cleared, and I've got an account at the bank—here's proof of it. Here's my pass book, containing a single entry—'Cash, £100,000'—that entry ought to last me all my life. Here's my cheque book, with one cheque drawn—for a hundred. And here are some of the hundred sovereigns they gave me for it."

He took a handful of gold coins out of his waistcoat pocket.

"I told them I'd have it all in gold, and I had it. I've never had a hundred sovereigns at one time in my life before. Aren't they pretty? Don't they shine? And every one of them worth twenty shillings! To mark this auspicious occasion, Mrs. Morris, I propose to present you with ten of them."

"I'm obliged to you, Mr. Earle, but I never accept presents from gentlemen, thanking you all the same; that is, unless you think it would be of service to Mr. Morris in his business, which, as I've heard him say that he has always openings for capital, it might be."

Her daughter interposed.

"Oh, no, mother, it mightn't; not if I know it. I'll be glad of those ten sovereigns; they'll come in handy for last quarter's rent, to say nothing of the rates, and Mr. Morris won't so much as know they're in the house till they've been paid."

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Mr. Morris's "business" was a pleasing legend of his wife's. So far as Rupert Earle had been able to ascertain his only business consisted in living, in as much comfort as circumstances permitted, on his wife and daughter. Miss Morris never hesitated to admit that she had the lowest possible opinion of her male parent. Mr. Earle went on.

"I'm perfectly well aware, Susan, that it's not the slightest use talking of making you a similar present; you'll devote it to next quarter's rent if I do—a deal of present there'll be about it for you. What I should like would be to give you half a dozen new frocks."

"You'd better! I should like to see myself wearing them, holding, as I do, that three dresses ought to be enough for any woman; one on, one off, and a best for Sunday."

"There's another thing I'd like to do—I'd like to give a leg-up to that young man of yours; to do something, if you'd only let me, to bring that wedding day of yours a little nearer."

Miss Morris, turning to the gas stove, adjusted the kettle at an angle which one hoped was more to her liking; one could not see what the kettle gained. Her voice became a trifle grim.

"It's very good of you, Mr. Earle, but I don't see how you're going to do it. Bob's getting on as well as is to be expected; he's got money saved up for the furniture; all he's waiting for is for me to name the day."

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Rupert Earle looked at the girl. She had been engaged to Bob Ellis for a good many years. She was not growing younger ; he had had a fancy lately that her freshness was fading and her prettiness passing. As it was understood she would not leave her mother at her father's mercy, and that gentleman's health was much better than he deserved, her prospects were not rosy. All at once Mr. Earle gave the subject a very personal turn.

"Do you know, Susan, that I have a young woman ?"

"No, Mr. Earle, have you really ? You've never spoken of her to me."

"That's true ; to you I've spoken only of the engine. I fancy that was because—the young woman was so deep down."

"Who is she, Mr. Earle ?—if you won't mind my asking."

"She's a dream ; a little while ago I was beginning to think she was a substance, but now I'm fearing that she was only a mirage after all."

Miss Morris's voice sank, as if in sympathy.

"Have you quarrelled ?"

"It takes two to make a quarrel."

"Sometimes one's enough."

"I suppose that is so ; I'm commencing to find that out. What rubbish those old proverbs are ! I'm telling you this in order that you may know that I also realise that the course of true love seldom does run smooth."

THE INTERRUPTED KISS

"But won't it make a difference now that you've got all that money?"

"I'm afraid it won't. She's not that kind of young woman. I don't believe she cares for money any more than she cares for brass-headed pins. Do you know, Susan, I believe I'll give myself a treat to-night."

"I should."

"I'll stand myself a topping dinner, and then I'll go somewhere. I suppose it's no good asking you to favour me with the pleasure of your society?"

"Not the least bit of good."

"You're a sympathetic soul. Save my own young woman, you're practically the only female person I know in the whole wide world to talk to, and, on this great day of my life, you're going to send me out alone."

"You'll soon know plenty of other women now you've got all that money."

"How dull I am, I never thought of that; I'd forgotten that this brings them."

He had his hand full of sovereigns.

"You're not going to take all that money out with you?"

"Not all. Is it likely that I should stroll round town with a jacket stuffed with sovereigns? I'll take ten pounds."

"You're not going to spend ten pounds on a night's amusement?"

"Why not? What are ten pounds?"

THE INTERRUPTED KISS

“ You talk like that, when only last week——”

“ My dear Susan, don’t let’s talk about last week,
let’s talk about the cheque I cleared to-day.”

“ As you like.”

“ Of course it’s as I like ; I don’t require you to
tell me that. Nor does it follow that because I take
ten pounds out with me I shall spend the lot.”

“ If you take ten pounds out with you, you
will.”

“ That’s a libel ; that—that’s a random statement.
I’ll demonstrate it by taking out ten pounds, and yet
my evening’s amusement shan’t cost me more than a
sovereign. In the morning I’ll tell you the night’s
history at full length, holding nothing back, and, at
the same time, I’ll lay before you the exact figures.”

CHAPTER XXII

TWO RECOGNITIONS

MR. EARLE was destined, before the night was out, to realise that the promise he had made Miss Morris was in all respects a rash one. He had undertaken to give her a full, true, and particular account of all that took place that night ; the story of what really did occur he never told to anyone. He had assured her, also, that his whole expenditure should not exceed a sovereign ; it was borne in upon him how hasty he had been in giving that assurance when the waiter brought his dinner. The change he had out of his sovereign when that was settled was so inconsiderable that it was plain, if he meant to adhere to what he had said, his evening's amusement was already finished. He rubbed his chin in his perplexity.

"Seventeen and sixpence for dinner, and eighteen-pence for the waiter, leaves one bob ; if Susan knew ! I wonder how long it is since I spent nineteen shillings on a dinner. It's put such heart in me that I've a mind to spend another sovereign on a seat—if there's a theatre in town which has the impudence to ask as much. Not that I'm sure that I feel equal

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to a theatre ; it sounds risky. Knowing as little of theatres as I do I may find myself patronising a play guaranteed to draw your heart out of your mouth, and to drown you in your own tears. Cheerful that would be ; I don't propose to bang a second sovereign on an entertainment of that enlivening description. I think it would be safer to make it a music hall."

He made it a music hall—so popular a one that when he arrived every seat was occupied. He had to stand, leaning against the railing which ran right round the stalls. His particular standing place was right at the end of this barrier, on one side of the house, but comparatively close to the stage ; not a bad point of vantage. Soon after he had taken up his stand a lady came on to the stage in abbreviated skirts which were of a bright scarlet hue, scarlet stockings, scarlet shoes, scarlet hat, with hair beneath it which was of a tint only one degree less vivid than the rest of her attire. Glancing at his programme to see who she was he found that her name was given, with that brevity which marks the music hall programme, as "Sallie Scarlett."

She had come on from the side of the stage which was opposite to him. As she entered she glanced rapidly round the house, beginning with that part of it in which he was. He had a feeling that she had singled out his face from among all the others ; that her eyes had rested on him for an appreciable part of a second before they travelled

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onwards. He might have been mistaken, yet it seemed to him that in them had not only been a light of recognition, but something which almost amounted to a shock of startled surprise. The whole episode lasted only three or four seconds. She had bowed, smiled, and commenced to sing before he had begun to realise what sort of person she actually was.

He must have been mistaken ; probably it was a trick of the lady's, to convey to male members of her audience the impression that there was something in her glance which had been meant especially for them. He certainly had never seen her before, of that he was convinced ; he was not likely to have forgotten an even casual encounter with a lady of such a striking personality. And yet, as she made her exit at the end of her first song, there undoubtedly did seem to be something significant in her eyes as they came his way ; it was almost as if she had signalled to him as she left the stage. Had he been a man of a different type he might have construed her glance as a compliment to himself, but he was not that kind of man. He was merely mildly amused at the idea that the lady might have mistaken him for somebody else.

While the audience was waiting for her to sing her second song a voice addressed him from behind in what struck him as a whisper of almost uncanny clearness ; it was so faint, yet so audible.

“Very nice, Sallie Scarlett, ain’t she, Mr. Earle ?”

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Turning to learn who was the owner of the singular voice who was acquainted with his name, he saw that at his back was an undersized man with a hairless face and unpleasant red eyes. He continued his appreciation of the lady.

"A i, I call her, both as a woman and an artiste, Mr. Earle."

Rupert Earle eyed him keenly. Not only was he convinced that the man was a stranger, and that he had never seen him before, but he had an instinctive feeling that he would just as soon never see him again.

"You appear to know my name, sir, but I don't know who you are."

"Never mind who I am, Mr. Earle, not just at the moment ; I may take the liberty of introducing myself perhaps some other time ; but just now who I am don't matter in the least. I notice that Sallie Scarlett she recognises you, Mr. Earle ; shows how you do stand out in a crowd ; twigged you the moment she came on, she did. Hasn't she got eyes ? Here she is again ; bet you a drink, Mr. Earle, that the first thing she does is look your way."

If Mr. Earle had accepted the man's bet he would have lost. The lady came on more slowly the second time. Not only did she stare at him directly she came on, but she continued to stare until she took up her position in the centre of the stage. So marked was the direction of her glance that many people looked round to see for whom it was intended.

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Rupert Earle was conscious of curious mental confusion. What on earth did the woman mean by favouring him with her attention in that conspicuous fashion ? He was persuaded that he had never seen her before, or heard the name. He seemed to be better known than he supposed. It appeared that that red-eyed stranger not only knew him, but took the red-headed performer's recognition of him as a matter of course. What the deuce did it mean ? He faced about to interrogate the fellow, to find that he had vanished, and that his place had been taken by one of the gorgeous attendants, who addressed him in a tone of confidential deference.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but is your name Mr. Rupert Earle ?"

"It is ; why do you ask ?"

"Then perhaps this note's for you, sir."

The attendant handed him an envelope on which was inscribed, in a decidedly doubtful handwriting, "Rupert Earle, Esq."

"Since it is addressed to me, I presume it is. But I don't know this writing. Who's it from ?"

"That's more than I can tell you, sir. It was sent round to me from behind with instructions that you was to have it at once."

The attendant withdrew. Mr. Earle saw that across one corner of the envelope was the word "Immediate." He opened it with a feeling that it looked as if he was going to have more entertainment than he had bargained for ; a feeling which was

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strongly increased when he had read the note which it contained.

" Dear Mr. Earle,—Please come round and meet me at the stage door directly you get this. There is something I want to say to you most important. For goodness' sake don't think because you don't know me I want to have a game with you. God knows it isn't so. There is someone you know very well I want to talk to you about, *who is in an awful hole*. So for God's sake come.

" Yours truly,

" SALLIE SCARLETT."

Just as he had read this, as it seemed to him, surprising effusion, he was addressed in the same odd whispering voice which had reached his ears before.

" So Sallie Scarlett's wrote you a note, has she, Mr. Earle ? Some men do have the luck ! "

Spinning round, he found that the stranger was again at his back.

" What the devil do you mean, sir, by speaking like that to me ? Who are you ? What concern are my affairs of yours ? "

Mr. Earle had put his question in a tone which was very much above a whisper. Many of the spectators turned to see who was disturbing the performance by speaking in such a manner. Someone said " Hush ! " The stranger, as if alarmed at the other's tone and manner, evinced a lively inclination to withdraw himself from the immediate neighbourhood.

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Mr. Earle watched him until he had disappeared in the crowd of promenaders, then returned to the consideration of the note ; with the result that within sixty seconds of Miss Scarlett's having made her final exit from the stage he quitted the building.

Having found the stage door with some little difficulty, he was informed by the janitor that to the best of his knowledge and belief the lady was "changing," and that if he wished to see her he would have to wait where he was. He had been waiting perhaps five minutes when a female figure came quickly through the swing door, which he only recognised as that of the gorgeous lady whom he had just seen upon the stage by the radiant colour of her hair. At sight of him she held out both her hands.

"So you have come !—Thank goodness ! If you only knew in what a palpitation I have been for fear you wouldn't."

Almost before he knew it he had her hands in his, and was looking down at her with a quizzical smile.

"It's very good of you to be so anxious to see me, but I'm afraid——"

She cut him ruthlessly short.

"Oh, I know ; I'll explain all about it."

She led the way into the street.

"That's my last turn ; now I'm free, and it's just as well I am ; I don't think I could do another one to-night. I expect you thought I was pretty rotten."

"On the contrary, I thought you were excellent ; only——"

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"Yes, I know, I put you in a flurry by the way I looked at you. I can tell you that the sight of you flurried me—put me clean off my business. I've hit 'em every time till to-night so that they'd hardly let me go ; but the sight of you standing there queered me ; I couldn't get at them anyhow. Compared to what I have been other nights I was a frost."

"But I don't see——"

"You will when I tell you. Let's go somewhere where we can have a drink ; I feel that if I don't have something I shan't last out. There's a quiet place over the road—you come along with me."

The impetuous small person stepped briskly across the road ; it seemed to him that he had no alternative but to go with her. She led the way into what seemed to be a small Italian restaurant, which at that hour was nearly deserted. She seated herself at a marble-topped table which was round a corner, in a sort of alcove, where, to all intents and purposes, they were practically alone.

"Black coffee for me," she announced, "with a splash of brandy—and, waiter, let the coffee be as strong as you can make it ; I want it to be a real old pick-me-up."

Mr. Earle gave a similar order for himself. When the refreshments came she began to talk, resting her elbows on the table, and leaning over it so that it should not be necessary to speak much above a whisper. He thought that now she had got her splendours off she was prettier than he had supposed ; with about her a

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touch of the *gamin* which was not unpleasing. She was such a thing of life and energy ; he felt sure, of courage, too. When she was most serious—and presently she came near to tragedy—there was still the suspicion of a smile about the corners of her lips and in her eyes, as if she were so used to fight with fate that she had learned to laugh at him, although he did his worst.

"I expect you thought it was like my cheek to stare at you like that, and to send you such a note ; and I daresay that now you're wondering what my game is. I don't suppose you remember ever having seen me before."

"I certainly cannot believe that I should have forgotten you if I had."

"Well, I've seen you, more than once—or I shouldn't have known you again, should I ? The last time I saw you was at Branxham."

"At Branxham ?"

"When you were giving evidence at the inquest on old Mr. Culver."

He started ; for some reason he found it difficult to associate this lively young lady with such an occasion.

"Another time I saw you in the Timberham woods, when, I believe, you'd been having a talk with Miss Grahame."

His surprise grew greater. He stared at her as if he were striving to recall her features to his memory.

"Miss Scarlett, you undoubtedly have an advantage

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over me ; I don't remember having seen you on either of those occasions."

"I daresay not ; I daresay you didn't see me ; you were thinking of other things. There was another time I saw you, and it's because of that time I sent you that note, asking you to come and have this talk."

"What time was that ?"

"I saw you talking to my boy."

"Your boy ?"

"I don't mean my son, bless the man ! I mean—Walter Palgrave."

"Walter Palgrave !"

"Ssh ! not so loud ! You don't want to shout it out anywhere, especially in a place like this, where, for all you know, walls have ears. Now, do you begin to understand ?"

"I'm afraid I don't."

"You're a friend of his."

"I don't know that I can quite say that—an acquaintance, perhaps, would be the better word. You see, he has always been a rich man, and I have always been a very poor one."

"I know, he's told me about it ; there isn't much he hasn't told me—more than he thinks, poor dear ! I can tell you this—he thinks a lot of you."

"That's very good of him."

"If there's a poorer man in London than he is now, I'm sorry for him. You know he's—wanted ?'

"You mean for——?"

THE INTERRUPTED KISS

"Yes—don't say it! The police are looking for him all over the shop; a nice time they've given me!"

"Given you?"

"Yes, given me. He's—he's in hiding at my place."

"Good God! You don't mean it!"

This time he was genuinely startled. So completely was he taken aback that, in his agitation, he knocked his cup and saucer with a clatter off the table on to the floor. The waiter came hurrying to pick up the ruins. The lady waited for another cup of coffee to be brought before she spoke again.

"For gracious sake don't go calling attention to us like that; you never can tell who may be about. If you can't keep a better hold of yourself than that I shan't dare to tell you anything, and Heaven knows I want to badly enough. The way you jumped was enough to break the chair!"

"I'm very sorry, but—you did take me so wholly unawares. Did you really mean what you said?"

"Of course I did; I almost wish I didn't; I've been hiding him ever since. The strain of it's getting to be too much. I've tried to get him to America, Australia, anywhere, if only for a while; he could have done it if he liked; but not he; he won't budge. I did think that now he's got no money of his own he'd be reasonable, and have some of mine—goodness knows I've had enough of his—but he won't; not a penny. As for running away with my money,

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as he calls it, he says he'll see me—well, he won't. I wish you'd come and talk to him."

"I will, with pleasure."

With a spontaneous gesture she laid her hands on his.

"I knew you would ; I knew you were that sort ; I'd have laid odds you were a trump. What he wants is a friend ; a gentleman like himself ; he'll listen to you : he won't to me. If he don't take care the drink will do for him. You know what a well plucked one he used to be—sometimes he's out of his mind with fear."

"Of what ?"

"You know."

"But he's innocent."

"Is he ? Are you sure ?"

"Aren't you ?"

"I—I'd like to be. You come and talk to him, and tell me what you think."

"But I know he's innocent."

"Do you ? You think you know, but I fancy you don't know so much as you think you do. If I were sure he were innocent I'd get him to give himself up to the police to-morrow."

"That's what he ought to have done long ago."

"But—supposing he's guilty, what then ? If the police get hold of him, what then ?"

The man saw something in the woman's eyes which caused an involuntary shudder to go all over him.

THE INTERRUPTED KISS

“ You’re representing to me, as a possibility, a thing which seems to me an impossibility. I don’t know what ground you have to go upon——”

“ You come and talk to him.”

“ But——” he drew a long breath——“ if what you hint is true, then the world’s turned upside down, and God help us all ! ”

“ I don’t say either one thing or the other—mind that ! I don’t want to say anything, only—you come and talk to him, and tell me what you think.”

“ When can I come ? Can I come at once ? ”

“ I’ll take you straight to him when we leave here ; only let’s take care that we’re not followed. I’ve got to that point that sometimes I feel as if there were watchers everywhere.”

CHAPTER XXIII

WALTER PALGRAVE

MISS SCARLETT took him to a part of town with which he was unfamiliar. Right across London by devious ways, with frequent changes by the way ; from cab to tram ; from tram to 'bus ; from 'bus again to tram ; then for quite a walk, with constant turnings, at the end. Had her wish been to throw him off the scent, to lead him he knew not where, she could scarcely have managed better. If they had been followed it must have been by an invisible spy ; beyond the faintest shadow of a doubt no visible creature had dogged their steps.

He had a sort of general impression that she had brought him somewhere in the neighbourhood of Blackheath. He would have been hard put to it to explain how he had arrived at that impression ; but he had. She finally stopped at a gate let into a brick wall, in what, so far as he was able to judge in the imperfect light, seemed a lane rather than a London street. She paused for a moment to look about her—there certainly was no one in sight, or within sound ; the place seemed to be as remote as if it had been in the heart of the country. Then, suddenly he saw that she had a key in her hand, with which she was unlocking the gate.

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"Quick!" she said "Get in!"

He passed through the gate; following instantly, she closed it behind her. It shut with a click.

"Thank goodness! I don't think anyone saw us that time!"

The words were gasped rather than spoken. He was nearly moved to laughter.

"My dear Miss Scarlett, I'm quite sure that no one saw us. I don't know where you've brought me, but it seems as if we are a hundred miles from anywhere; I should judge that there wasn't a human being within a mile."

"That's all you know; within that distance there are thousands. They're all round us. Come quietly; perhaps he's gone to bed; he sometimes has at this time of night."

The words suggested to his mind a singular vista.

"Is he in the house all alone?"

"He is. But would you mind not asking any questions? By that, what I mean to say is that you can ask him as many questions as you like, but don't ask me."

He had grown more and more to realise, as they had come along, that the situation was at once much more singular, and much more delicate, than he at first supposed. It hardly needed her request to drive that conviction further home. Moving towards the house, which stood in the centre of what seemed to be a small garden, she again gained ingress by means of a key. No sooner had she done so than a masculine voice exclaimed :

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"Who's there? Who the devil's there?"

A door was opened at the back, through which a light came streaming; the only light which, so far, had been seen about the place. From without the building had seemed to be all in darkness. Miss Scarlett replied in tones which were almost suspiciously cheerful.

"It's all right, old man; it's only me—and a friend."

"A friend? What friend? I haven't a friend. Who's that you've brought with you?"

The lady touched Mr. Earle on the elbow. Taking the hint that gentleman went forward.

"Hallo, Palgrave! Miss Scarlett's been good enough to give me a chance of looking you up; I can't tell you how glad I am to see you again."

"Glad to see me again? Who the devil——"

The speaker drew back into the lighted room. Earle following, the other, when he saw who he was, broke into a shout of welcome.

"Why, Earle, my dear old chap! Why, you crack-brained beggar, I'm as glad to see you as if you were old John Culver risen from the grave. And how's the engine? Still burning holes in your pockets? Still going to make your fortune when they've laid you in a pauper's grave?"

Earle laughed, though he felt in anything but a laughing mood when he saw the man in front of him. The Walter Palgrave he had known had been one of the smartest and best-dressed men in town; who would

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have deemed his reputation lost had a single item of his attire been below the highest standard of the current taste. This person was an unkempt, half-dressed vagabond, whose head looked as if it had not been touched by a hair-brush for a week, or by a barber for six months ; on whose face was a fortnight's stubble ; who was clad in what had apparently once been a suit of pyjamas, the jacket of which he wore open, disclosing an ancient flannel shirt which was unbuttoned at the neck. Mr. Earle made an effort to conceal what he felt at the spectacle the whilom dandy presented, and hoped that he succeeded. He made what he was aware was a sufficiently banal remark ; having a feeling that this was an occasion on which the more banality he could get into the air the better—since it was already overcharged with the abnormal.

“ How’s the world been using you ? ”

“ Using me ? Damn it, man, can’t you see how it’s been using me ? Haven’t you eyes in your head ? If it hadn’t been for Sallie there they’d have had quicklime on me long ago. By the way, I’ve been trying to find out if they do use quicklime for them nowadays. Can you tell me ? ”

“ Palgrave, old man, you always were a bit of an ass.”

“ Thank you for nothing. What price you ? With your crack-pot engine ! ”

“ But I never thought you could be such an ass as this, upon my Sam, I didn’t.”

“ Who cares what you thought ? Have a drink.”

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"No, thank you; I don't want a drink, and you don't either."

Reaching over the table Rupert Earle snatched up a bottle which the other was moving. Palgrave glared at him in angry resentment.

"Mr. Earle! Put that down; don't you imagine you can take liberties with me."

"To think that you should play the fool like this. I always suspected that you had a screw loose, but I did not suppose you were an absolute sotter. Masquerading in that rig-out, as if you were a half-baked clown at a fair, and hiding yourself like a cur in a kennel."

"Mr. Earle, I killed John Culver; and if you don't take care——"

"You did not kill John Culver."

"Pray, how do you know?"

"Because I was sober, and you weren't."

"That's it—I was drunk; if I hadn't been drunk I should not have killed him. I admit it. But does that alter the fact that I disposed of the poor dear old gentleman? That may be one of the cases in which killing's no murder, though I doubt it; but—it's killing."

"How did you kill him?"

"What a question to expect a man to answer! Are you a judge of the last instance? Am I before the last tribunal, at which all men must lay their secrets bare?"

"You make one assertion, I make another. I can give you chapter and verse for mine; I merely ask if you can do the same."

"I can."

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"Then do it."

"Your tone's peremptory ; but, to oblige you, sir, I will even go so far. You remember that night ? "

"Perfectly, every moment of it."

"How we went up to our rooms with the spoil ? "

"I know you went into yours, because I shut the door, at your request, when you were in."

"And directly afterwards I came out of it again. I wanted a drink."

"You'd had too much already."

"There's the point—when I've had too much I can never have enough. I remembered that there was drink in the billiard room. I went and got it. I emptied all the whisky there was in one decanter, and all the brandy there was in another. I thought it would be a lark to mix them ; so I did. Of that I have a distinct recollection. Afterwards, I admit, there comes a blur."

Mr. Earle recalled what Tyrrell, the butler, had said about his having found the two decanters empty in the morning. So this was the explanation ? Palgrave went on half jauntily, half savagely, as if he were possessed by some mocking demon.

"As, I suppose, I'd drunk inside five minutes a bottle of whisky and brandy mixed neat, it wasn't strange that there came—a blur. A man once told me I'd what he called a fine liquid capacity ; but that was beyond even me. My own impression is that for, say, half an hour after I'd drunk that big drink I was stark staring mad ; it was during that half-hour it happened.

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The next thing I clearly recollect is finding myself in the wood with my arms full of papers, and no hat on, and wondering how the devil I'd got there. What brought me to sudden consciousness I've no idea ; it didn't last long ; I believe that immediately afterwards I was as drunk as ever. The dickens only knows how, ultimately, I got where I did. There's a saying that Providence watches over children and drunken men. I proved the latter half of it that night. In the morning I understood."

"What do you mean by you understood ? I should have thought that in the morning you'd have had such a head on you that you weren't in a fit state to understand anything."

"In one sense that was so ; but when I heard that old Culver was dead I knew I'd killed him."

"Man, you're no nearer answering my question now than you were at the beginning. How do you know you killed him ?"

"It's not easy to make you understand."

"Don't take it for granted that I'm so much duller than the average man ; try."

"That morning I had a sort of dim vision in which I saw myself crouching on the library floor, picking up papers ; and old Culver coming in and making a rush at me, I sprang up with a yell—I'm convinced it will be found I yelled—and hit him with something I snatched up from the floor. Then, grabbing up the papers anyhow, somehow I got through a window, and went scurrying through the night. That first

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morning the vision was very dim, but, with continued repetition, it has grown clearer and clearer; until now, if I were set the task, I could reconstruct the crime to the satisfaction even of a French *juge de paix*."

"You must forgive my speaking plainly, but I'm convinced that you were merely the victim of a drunkard's imagination."

"I'll forgive the plainness; but why do you say that?"

"You were in such a state of mind that you were ready to believe anything of yourself. If I'd been killed you'd have been perfectly willing to claim the credit of that, even if I'd fallen on to my head from a sixth floor window. I should say that the morning after a man had drunk half a bottle of whisky and half a bottle of brandy mixed neat, practically at one big swallow, nothing would content him but the conviction that he was a monster of wickedness; and as you seem to have stuck to the same prescription ever since, no wonder the conviction's kept on growing."

"I hope you're right. I wish I could believe it. Then I shouldn't so often feel at night that John Culver's fingers were fitting a rope about my neck."

"There you are—delirious! If you don't swear off before long you'll be feeling sure that you killed ten John Culvers."

"You must always bear in mind that old Culver was killed; and if I didn't kill him, who did?"

"Great Scott, man, what logic! I might as well say if I didn't kill him, who did?"

"You've not been found guilty of murder—I have.

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"By a coroner's jury—who cares for a coroner's jury! If you'd only seen those addle-headed young men; and that gem of a coroner—I felt like kicking him myself! Anyhow, you've only your ridiculous behaviour to thank—if you hadn't been raving drunk you'd never have left the house; if you hadn't had such a head in the morning you'd have come straight back, or you'd have come back at the earliest possible moment. In short, you'd have done anything but what you have done—behaved like a fool and a coward."

"Thanks; you're a candid friend."

"I can't help it; perhaps the cold truth will do you good. You've been living in a fevered atmosphere of alcoholic lies."

"Quite a phrase—bravo, Mr. Earle! Now what do you propose I should do? Give myself up to the police? I shall be found guilty by twelve clear-headed young men directed by a judge of assize if I do—to a certainty. I shall convict myself out of my own mouth, because, if asked to plead, I shall say 'Guilty.' I haven't even enough courage left to tell a lie at so crucial a moment."

"Then, if that's the attitude you're going to take up, it seems that the only thing to be done is to find the actual criminal."

"I trust that you may find him, and that he mayn't be me. What a weight you'll lift off my soul if you can prove that I've only been the victim of a drunkard's fancies. I'll be happy again."

"Palgrave, you're not naturally a coward."

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"I'm not so sure. No man can tell till he's done with. In every man, and in every woman, there's a coward somewhere, waiting for a chance."

"But you're not naturally the dirty kind of coward who flies to drink to hide his funk."

"I don't do that."

"Then why do you drink ?"

Mr. Palgrave shrugged his shoulders.

"Because there's something calling. I've always drunk ; ever since I've known you, and long before. Some of my happiest hours have been spent in the company of a bottle and Sallie. In those days I wasn't always drinking ; I'd other things to do. Now what have I ?—shut up ?—I don't care for reading, I've never willingly read a book in my life, and I never shall. I've no what are called intellectual resources, which console a man who's confined to the house. The things I can do and want to do I can't do. I prowl, prowl, prowl, from morn to morn, upstairs and downstairs, all the day and most of the night ; and, in the intervals, I drink. I do not drink because I'm the kind of coward you suggest, but because there's something in me which likes drink ; and because I've nothing else to do."

"Supposing I prove you innocent, what then ?"

"Then I'll marry Sallie ; if she'll have me. Sallie, will you dare to venture on a drunkard for a husband ?"

For the first time Miss Scarlett spoke. She was sitting on the corner of a table, swinging her feet in the air.

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"I'll marry you all right, old boy, if I ever get the chance."

"But if this sanguine Mr. Earle doesn't prove my innocence, and they hang me?"

"I'll go with you to the gallows, and they can hang me too, so long as I'm your wife."

"But the misfortune is that they won't hang you for what I did."

"I'm not so sure of that. There's such a thing as being guilty after the event. I believe they hang for that."

She spoke with a cheerfulness which, as before, was suspicious. When she was letting Rupert Earle out of the garden gate she asked him an anxious question.

"Well? Do you think he did it?"

"I'm sure he didn't."

"Sure! After what you heard him say?"

"I don't care what he said. I know he didn't do it."

"How can you know? So sure as that?"

Instead of answering her question he said something which filled her with evident surprise.

"He's a lucky man."

"Lucky! You call him lucky! Then—who's unlucky?"

"I call no man unlucky who knows a woman who'll go through hell for him."

"If a woman cares for a man she cares for him, doesn't she? If she cares for him she doesn't care what she does for him!"

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"It's only the lucky man who has a woman who cares for him like that."

Rupert Earle seemed to be in no hurry to reach his own part of the world when he had left that strange abode behind. He quickly learnt that, as Miss Scarlett had said, it was not by any means so remote as it appeared. He had not gone very far before he found himself amidst a wilderness of houses. He wandered along street after street, without knowing where he was or caring to inquire, as if his thoughts absorbed him to the exclusion of all else. His night's amusement was taking a singular form. At last it did dawn upon him that he might as well get some idea of where he was. He looked about in search of some familiar landmark, but there was none. He was in a street of small houses; a long street, badly lighted. Most of the houses were in darkness, as if the inhabitants were in bed. He looked at his watch; it was nearly two o'clock.

"Great Potiphar! What an hour! Susan will be wondering where I am; she'll be taking it for granted that I'm having a most uproarious time. How, sometimes, appearances are against a man. How am I going to find my way to Kite Street, Wandsworth?"

There was not a soul in sight. He walked to the end of the long street; turned to the left, then to the right, without meeting a living creature. Then, on a sudden, he found himself in a great highway in which there were some signs of life. Some carts were

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crawling slowly along in the distance, going, he presumed, to one of the morning markets. He looked in vain for a cab. Tram lines ran down the centre of the road ; near him was a standard carrying an electric wire, but there was nothing to show that the cars were running. All at once someone approached from behind ; apparently from the street he had just come out of—a short man, who went sauntering by as if in no hurry. Mr. Earle hailed him as he passed.

“Can you tell me where I am likely to find a cab ?”

The man stopped to answer.

“You’re not likely to find a cab anywhere round here ; people in this part of the world haven’t got the money for that kind of thing—they don’t use cabs. But the tram-cars, they keep running all through the night ; if you walk on, either way, one will catch you up before you’ve gone very far.”

Something in the speaker’s voice struck Rupert Earle as familiar.

“Haven’t I met you somewhere before ?”

“Yes, Mr. Earle, you have, and very uncalled-for your behaviour was to me ; most uncalled-for.”

“You’re the man who spoke to me to-night at the music hall.”

“Yes, Mr. Earle, I am ; and the way you spoke to me back again surprised me more than a little ; straight it did.”

“What are you doing here ?”

“Why, Mr. Earle, I’m strolling along.”

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"Are—are you dogging my footsteps?"

"Dogging your footsteps! Well! There! Can't I walk about the streets of London without having a charge like that chucked at my head? If I can't, things are coming to a pretty pitch—they are that. Is it any business of mine if you goes and pays calls on Mr. Walter Palgrave—is it?"

"How do you know?"

"Steady! Steady on! Here's someone coming along who takes a lot more interest in Mr. W. P. than I do. You shut your mouth till he's gone by."

A heavy tread came stamping along the pavement. A big, loosely-hung man, with something about his clothes and bearing which was redolent of the country came swinging by. At sight of the little man he paused, addressing him with a significance which was very like a threat.

"So it is you, is it? I thought I saw you. Up to your games again!"

The little man's manner as he replied, savoured unmistakably of impudence.

"Oh yes, Mr. Wilkins, it's me all right, and very glad I am to see you, Mr. Wilkins; though it is a little latish. Hope you're well; and all the good folks down Woodcote way. How's Farmer Bates' sow? The one, I mean, what you thought was stole."

There was apparently something esoteric in the allusion to "Farmer Bates' sow" which angered the person addressed.

"All right, my lad—smart, aren't you? Those

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laugh longest who laugh last ! Next time you get put away it will be for a bit longer than you think."

Without waiting for a retort the big man stamped off, swinging a little from side to side as he walked. So soon as he was out of hearing the little man asked Mr. Earle.

"Do you know who that is ?"

"I do not."

"He knows who you are. It was to get a good look at you he stopped to talk to me. A nice mess you've made of things !"

"Have I ? In what way ? Who is your friend ?"

"Friend—my friend ! my crikey—him a friend of mine ! Him ! That's George Wilkins, what's a policeman down at Woodcote. They've set him to find the party what killed old Culver. He's something out of the common run of country policemen, and they seem to have found it out. Before we're much older he'll find the party what killed John Culver, as sure as your name's Rupert Earle, and mine ain't."

Mr. Earle stood to look at Mr. Wilkins, who must have been moving quicker than he seemed to be, since he was already nearly out of sight. When Mr. Earle turned to look for the little man he had vanished ; having probably taken advantage of the other's abstraction to beat a strategic retreat round the corner.

CHAPTER XXIV

IF IN WANT OF A WIFE, TAKE ONE

RUPERT EARLE said nothing to Miss Morris of his adventures of the previous night, nor did he volunteer any information as to whether his expenditure had exceeded a sovereign. He was still in his bedroom when she brought in his breakfast ; so soon as he had finished his meal he went out. Not long afterwards he put in an appearance at some flats near Sloane Square. Ascending to the fourth storey by the lift, he knocked at a door, and inquired of the neat maid if Mr. Harmar was in. She told him that he was, and ushered him into an apartment in which that gentleman was reading his morning papers as a sort of postscript to his morning meal. He looked up with a look of genuine pleasure as his visitor entered.

" Hallo, Earle !—this is unexpected—you are an early bird. Had breakfast ? "

" Thanks ; I've had all the breakfast I want. To tell you the truth, I hardly expected to see you, although I wanted to badly enough. How are things going ? "

" They're not going ; they've got into a beastly ditch, and there they're bidding fair to stick—or, if they

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can be said to be going, then they're going all wrong. Frankly—although, mind, I don't blame you, I'm conscious I've only myself to blame—still I wish I hadn't come in with you that night ; that I'd left your proposal severely alone."

"I made no proposal. I told you in confidence what I proposed to do ; the proposal that you should follow suit came from you."

"That's true ; I was led away by Palgrave's eagerness."

"That's stuff. Palgrave was drunk. You were sober, as sober as I was. Like me, you were driven by necessity. Culver had us under his heel ; we made a desperate effort to fend off the evil day when he would bring it down and squash us."

"A pretty wild cat effort it was ! We should have been nicely in the soup if — if he'd been alive in the morning."

"I quite realise that his demise was the best thing that could have happened to us."

"If it hadn't been for what you call his demise he'd have found out what had happened, as he was bound to do, and we should have been worse off than ever."

"Personally, I was prepared to face the music. After I'd got—what I did get, he'd have found me a harder nut to crack than you perhaps imagine."

"Oh, I believe that—easily."

"He'd lent me £1,100 ; if he'd given me a little time I was willing to let him have his money back twice over ; three times over ; four times, if he liked—

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but I was not willing that he should rob me of millions, of all the fruits of my life-long labours. I did nothing of which I am ashamed ; of which I have cause to be ashamed—nothing which I would not do again if the position recurred. You may constitute any jury of honest men you like, and I'll tell them my story. Whatever the legal aspect of the case might be, they would acquit me morally, and each one of them, if he were a man, would admit that, in my position, he would have done as I did. I have nothing to repent ; have done nothing which I wish undone."

Mr. Harmar drew a long breath which sounded very like a sigh.

"I'd be glad if I could speak with the same cock-sureness. If I may hazard a surmise, judging from your remarkably cock-a-doodly attitude, I should say that it looks uncommonly as if that engine of yours had turned up trumps with a vengeance."

"It has. I've received one hundred thousand pounds for an option, which, if exercised within seven days, is to bring me, at the end of that time, a further half million in hard cash. In which case I am within the mark when I say that I and my descendants ought to receive at least a solid million a year ; and, quite probably, very much more ; practically for ever and ever."

"Then your Arabian Nights dreams are coming true ; small wonder there's nothing of which you repent. If I were in a similar case ! As it is, I feel as if I'd jockeyed Elsie Grahame out of ten thousand

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pounds to serve as a sop in the pan for the army of my creditors."

"If there's anything I can do I'll do it; don't let any money troubles worry you."

"It's very nice of you to talk like that, considering how they have been worrying me. If that second will turns up I shall want someone to do something, because my last state will be worse than my first."

"Is Mrs. Harmar with you?"

"Not she; I'm alone; and, so far as she is concerned, I rather fancy that she'd sooner I was alone. We used to be inseparable, but since that night an impalpable wall seems to have sprung up between us; and—we're inseparable no longer. I'm beginning to wonder if I've lost my wife."

"Does she guess?"

"She not only guesses, she knows; but how much she knows I don't know; and I don't dare to ask. Oh, you may have come out at the top, and I'm sure I hope you have; it's a comfort to know that someone's scored; but I've come out very much at the bottom, and it looks as if I were going to stop there."

"And how's the other person?"

"There's another thing—what's wrong with Elsie Grahame? Something is!"

"How wrong? What do you mean?"

"I'm wondering if she's in communication with Palgrave?"

"That she certainly isn't."

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"How do you know?"

"The principal purpose of my coming is to talk to you about him. Harmar, there's going to be trouble in that quarter. Before very long the police will have him; he says when they get him he shall plead guilty."

"Good Lord! But—surely—"

"I saw him last night, and, in consequence, I'm here this morning. I want to tell you, as exactly as I can, what took place."

He told the story of his adventures of the previous night with sufficient particularity to make an unpleasant impression on his auditor, as was shown by the remark which Mr. Harmar made as soon as the tale was finished.

"In the face of what you've just been telling me you say that there's nothing about that night which you regret."

"I did not say 'regret'; the word I used was 'repent.' I said that, given the same circumstances, I'd do all that I did do over again; and so I would—only with this difference, that I'd take precious good care to leave you and Palgrave out."

"But, man alive! supposing he does plead guilty, where shall we be?"

"In an uncomfortable position, beyond a doubt."

"It's quite possible that we may find ourselves in the dock beside him."

"Oh, quite!"

"Earle, you're a cheerful beggar. It strikes me

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that if you do find yourself in the dock beside him you'll find that you've paid too dearly for your whistle, however well worth having it may be. And where do I come in ? Without a whistle ?"

"Keep your head, man. If Palgrave had kept his he wouldn't be in the mess he is."

"It's all very well for you to talk ; you seem to think that you're on rollers—but what price me ? Anyhow I'll be ruined, discredited ; socially, financially—all ways. You can't blink the fact that, look at it as you choose, what we did was robbery."

"I deny that, so far as I'm concerned. What I did was to take steps to prevent myself from being robbed."

"Tell that to the marines ! Take my advice and don't tell it to the police—they've a cruder point of view than you seem to have. It occurs to me that about the best thing we can do is to make a bolt of it ; if we start at once we may have a better chance than poor Palgrave seems likely to have."

"I certainly won't bolt, and, if I can help it, you won't either. If you do it will be equivalent to running your neck into the noose, as Palgrave's done. I'll tell you what I propose we shall do presently. I've come here to do it. In the meanwhile, old chap, will you mind telling me what you meant by saying that there is something wrong with Miss Grahame ?"

"You remember that last time we dined together ? As I was walking home, and had entered the

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grounds, I heard a revolver shot, followed by the sound of a heavy body falling with a great splash into water. The whole jolly row came from the direction of the lake. I started off to see what could have caused it, when who should come along but Elsie Grahame and Boris—you know, the big St. Bernard. When she said that she'd just come from the lake I took it for granted that the splash had been caused by Boris, who had been treating himself to a bath, so I felt him. But no ; he was dry as a bone, he hadn't been near the water. When I asked what the rumpus had been about she wanted me to believe that I'd heard wrong ; that there'd been no splash, no revolver fired—she actually cracked the dog-whip she had in her hand to make out that it was that I'd heard—as if, at close quarters, I could mistake the crack of a whip for the crack of a gun ! While we were talking, I don't know how it came about, but I touched her arm. Earle, it was soaking wet ! I looked at my hand—it was covered with blood. Whoever had fired had hit her somewhere in the upper part of the arm, and she'd tried to make me believe that no one had fired at all."

" Didn't she offer an explanation ? "

" I didn't ask for one. I saw plainly enough that there was a secret, and that she wanted to keep it. So I let her go into the house, and I took Boris to his kennel ; then I went round the lake on my own account. On the bank, by the summer house, I found a revolver—a cheap Belgian thing—with one of its

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cartridges recently discharged, and a briar-wood pipe, which was still warm. My dear man, there was only one way out of it ; she had deliberately tried to make me believe the thing that was not. A man had been there, and I shouldn't be surprised if, in consequence, Boris had sent him flying into the water—that was the splash I'd heard. As I'd met her almost immediately afterwards it looked as if she'd left him in the water. I didn't like the idea at all. So I got out the boat, and I did a bit of dragging ; but as I found nothing I could only suppose that if he had ever been in, he had got out and gone off, and left his revolver and his pipe behind him."

"What made you think it was Palgrave ?"

"I didn't know what to think ; I don't now. That isn't all. When I went in—you can fancy it was latish—she came out of the library, in her dressing gown, looking as if she'd seen twenty ghosts. She said she'd come down to fetch an envelope which she had in her hand ; but when I got upstairs Clare told me that the telephone bell had been ringing like blazes—mind you, at that time of night!—and that she'd heard Elsie talking to someone through it. She'd heard Elsie promise to send somebody £500—she'd been leaning over the landing in a pretty state of fluster ; the library door was open ; Elsie had been talking in a loudish tone of voice, apparently by particular request, so that she couldn't help hearing. And, sure enough, after breakfast, Elsie asked Clare if she could tell her where she could get £500 by the

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following Friday ; Clare said she couldn't. Elsie went out, and an hour or two afterwards came back with the information that she had got the money. Clare said she had an envelope in her hand which she believes was stuffed with bank notes."

"What's the inference you draw from all this ?"

"Who's Lionel Fitzherbert ?"

"Hanged if I know ! Why do you ask ?"

"Because Clare believes that the money was sent to a Lionel Fitzherbert, and from that I've inferred that Lionel Fitzherbert is the name under which Palgrave's hiding. Since then Elsie's been a changed girl—something's wrong. She's fading before our eyes. She neither eats nor drinks ; Clare doesn't believe she sleeps. Earle, she's haunted—I don't know by what, but by something. I'm haunted in a sort of way myself, so that I recognise the thing when I see it in another, but her plight's much worse than mine, though mine is bad enough. Earle, do you know what I recommend you to do—with her ?"

"How can I do anything with her—when she won't speak or look at me, or, if she can help it, stay in the same street ?"

"I shouldn't ask her what she will or won't do. There's a touch of berserk in you. You're a lineal descendant of the gentlemen who, when they wanted a thing, took it ; whether it was a wife or any other little trifle, of which at the moment they stood in need. You want Elsie—my dear man, take her."

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"What the something does the fellow mean? How on earth am I going to do it?"

"You're not so dull as that. You wanted those papers old Culver had; you found out a way; you took 'em. You want Elsie—what's the sequitur? If you want her enough you'll find out a way to take her. Kidnap her, if that's the word. Tuck her under your arm, without asking if she likes the position. March her off to some secluded spot, and explain to her—with a battle axe, if necessary—that she's got to be your wife. She'll say yes."

"Will she? You've your own ideas of wooing."

"They're not my ideas. They're the ideas which have ruled intercourse between the sexes since the world was in its cradle. It's doubtful if that intercourse has grown sweeter as they've waned. You love her."

"Love her!"

Earle laughed.

"That's not the word. I'd go through Hades for her."

He was thinking of what Miss Scarlett had said the night before.

"You believe that she loves you."

"I know she does."

"Then that's all that matters. If a woman cares for a man, with her nothing else counts; she thinks that it does, but it doesn't; the woman that is in her forgives him everything—if he handles her as a man should. He may pop her on a motor car, and

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whirl her to Timbuctoo, without asking her sanction ; as she may suppose, very much against her will ; when he's got her there, and has played the man, if she loves him, the only thing for which she'll care is, that he whom she loves has played the man. Civilisation's a veneer ; the woman underneath is the woman of the Stone Age, who clung to the man who had haled her to his hut, and held her there against all comers."

When Mr. Harmar ceased speaking Rupert Earle was silent. He was thinking, not so much of the singularity of this gentleman's views, in this day of woman's rights and wrongs, but of their similarity to Miss Scarlett's code of philosophy, as she had enunciated it to him at the gate in the wall, on the preceding night.

CHAPTER XXV

RUPERT EARLE MAKES THE ACQUAINTANCE OF LIONEL FITZHERBERT, ESQUIRE

WHEN Rupert Earle was returning home, with Mr. Edwin Harmar's curious ideas of how a man should woo a maid filling all his mind, at the corner of Kite Street he came upon someone who brought him back with a bump from the somewhat romantic regions in which he had metaphorically been soaring. He had been struck, as he approached it on foot from Sloane Square, by the dinginess of that part of Wandsworth regarded as a residential quarter, especially as the habitation of one who was practically already a millionaire. Fancy asking Miss Grahame to share his life in such a—he did not like to call it a slum, but in such an unlovely locality. Were he, acting on Mr. Harmar's hint, to bear her away with him in a motor car, it should be to a very different scene to this; to a palace on a wooded slope, overlooking a lake, with mountains beyond, amid surroundings of perfect beauty; and in the palace itself should be everything which the soul or a woman could desire. So circumstanced it would go hard with him if he could not win her 'at least to resignation with her lot; so that one day she would

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whisper the confession that she was glad that he had made her, even by a return to the practices of the Stone Age, according to Edwin Harmar, his wife.

From these, and similar Alnaschar visions, he suddenly descended when accosted by a voice which was associated in his mind with something not at all agreeable.

“Excuse me, Mr. Earle, but I’ve just been venturing to make a little call at your rooms, Mr. Earle, and was so unfortunate as to find you out.”

It needed no second glance to tell him who the speaker was—it was the red-eyed individual who had addressed him last night at the music hall, and whom he had afterwards encountered in such mysterious fashion after quitting Walter Palgrave’s hiding place. The sight of this stranger appeared to move him to what seemed unreasonable anger.

“Who the deuce are you? And what the devil do you mean by speaking to me?”

The man cast about him what seemed to be anxious glances.

“If you can spare me a few minutes of your valuable time, Mr. Earle, I’ve something to say to you which I’m sure you’ll find most interesting.”

“Come to my rooms; I’ll make short work of you.”

There was something about the fashion of the invitation which, not unnaturally, the stranger did not seem to find altogether alluring. He drew back.

“There’s a highly respectable coffee shop close by; if you’ve no objection, Mr. Earle, I’d much rather have

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a little talk with you in there. We shall be quite private, I do assure you."

"Why should I come with you to a coffee shop, when my rooms are within a hundred yards?"

"Well, Mr. Earle, I'll be quite frank with you. I'm a timid man, Mr. Earle, and if I was to come with you to your rooms you might, as you put it yourself, make short work of me. If you was to try on anything like that, Mr. Earle, it might be the death of me, it really might."

Earle laughed. He was conscious that the man's attitude was not unjustified. He had towards him such a feeling of aversion, though the reason why he could scarcely tell, that he was aware that it would not need much to induce him to subject him to unpleasant usage. In a place of public resort like a coffee shop the stranger might at least feel that he was running no appreciable risk of personal violence.

They went together to the coffee shop of which the stranger had spoken. It was of a humble sort, divided into old-fashioned boxes. In one of them they were as private as Mr. Earle had been with Miss Scarlett in the Italian restaurant the night before. Only the circumstances were so different; he had then felt as drawn towards the lady as he was now repelled by the man. So strong, indeed, was his feeling of repulsion that he was ashamed of being even momentarily in his company; he wanted the fellow to say what he had to say as quickly as he could, and be rid of him. He told him so plainly. *

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"I'm sure, Mr. Earle, you needn't stay a moment longer than you want, but I must begin with what I'll call a little bit of personal history. A sainted aunt, Mr. Earle, lately left me a snug legacy which I proposed to devote to making a fresh start in life, in the only country in which it seems a man can make a fresh start—America. But just as I was starting I was robbed of it all, so that now I'm worse off than ever."

"What was the amount?"

"Exactly five hundred pounds, Mr. Earle—a nice little sum for a man like me."

For some reason Rupert Earle's thoughts flew to the sum which, according to her husband, Mrs. Harmar had said that Elsie Grahame stood in need of. He observed the man with greater curiosity, as one in whom he might have a possible unsuspected interest.

"Why do you repose in me this uninvited confidence?"

The man's voice dropped to a thread-like whisper. As before, he looked anxiously about him.

"Well, Mr. Earle, it's like this—there's Mr. Walter Palgrave, sir. As you and I very well know, there are certain people who are looking for him—most anxiously they're looking. It might be worth five hundred pounds to whoever told them where to find him—properly managed it might be worth even more than that."

"Is that the idea? So last night you did dog my footsteps."

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"No, Mr. Earle, I did not ; you wrong me, Mr. Earle ; you've no notion how you wrong me. I've known where Mr. W. P. was quite a time. I wouldn't give him away ; no, not me, I'm not that sort ; not if I could help it. Only, you see, to a man in my unfortunate position, what a temptation it is ; what I'm asking you to do is to put me out of temptation's reach."

"There are several ways of doing that. Are you suggesting that I should give you money, not to sell an innocent man to the police ?"

"If someone was to give me five hundred pounds, Mr. Earle, I'd start for America by the next boat, and never, never come back again."

"That would be a good thing for your country, I admit. It would be a still better if someone were to drop you overboard on the way."

"Ah, Mr. Earle, I've been given to understand that you were of a humorous turn of mind."

"You'd find me of a practical humour if I had my way with such carrion as you. You impudent blackguard, to dare to address me with such a proposition ! How do you imagine I am concerned in what becomes of the gentleman you mention ?"

"Oh, Mr. Earle, now you do want to practise on my simplicity ; you do, really. As if I didn't know you are all mixed up in the mess together, so that what puts him in the cart puts you. To say nothing of a certain young lady. You ought to think of her Mr. Earle, you really did."

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"To what young lady do you refer?"

"Why, of course, Mr. Earle, to Miss Elsie Grahame."

"We are not playing this game on even terms; you have me at an advantage. You know who I am, but I have not the dimmest notion what particular scrap of garbage you may chance to be. Who are you?"

"So long as I know who you are, does it matter who I am?—does it, Mr. Earle?"

"You're damnable at home with my name; what's yours?"

"Shall we say, just for the sake of my having a name—shall we say—Lionel Fitzherbert, Esquire?"

They were seated at a narrow table. Mr. Earle had his elbows on the board; Mr. Fitzherbert was sitting close up to it on the other. Suddenly the taller man's hands going out caught the smaller one by the throat, and began to treat him in a fashion which he could hardly have found agreeable.

"So it is you, you hound! I was beginning to think it was."

A person in his shirt-sleeves, who was probably the proprietor, came rushing towards them.

"Here! Stop that! What are you doing? Do you want to kill the man? Stop it, I say!"

Rupert Earle loosened his hold.

"I'll stop it; to oblige you—and for the present. After all, merely to kill the man would probably be to treat him better than he deserves."

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The coatless gentleman was giving his attention to Mr. Fitzherbert, who was leaning, somewhat limply, against the partition at his back.

"What have you done to him to make him treat you like that? Has he hurt you?"

Mr. Fitzherbert's reply suggested that any damage he had received had been merely superficial.

"Not so much by a long chalk as I'll hurt him before I've done with him."

The landlord seemed to scent in the words an intention to continue the argument upon the spot.

"None of that, now; I won't have that sort of thing in my house—out you go, both of you. You get off my premises."

Mr. Fitzherbert, rising from his seat, shook himself somewhat as a dog might have done. His manner was decidedly acid.

"All 'right, guv'nor, don't you fret your gizzard; I'm going, and only too glad to get the chance. As for you, Mr. Rupert Earle, you'll find me waiting for you outside."

Mr. Fitzherbert passed into the street with an air which was probably as dignified as he knew how to make it. Mr. Earle, left behind, was aware that his dignity had suffered. The landlord, with the palms of his hands on his hips, was regarding him with an air of extreme disapprobation.

"After what's happened you can't stay here any more than your friend—out you go! And no more of your games outside my shop, because I won't have

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'em. I'm surprised that a gentleman like you should have any truck with a chap like him."

"I'm not at all surprised that you're surprised, because I'm surprised myself. Good-day."

Mr. Earle followed his "friend," whom he found, as he had been assured would be the case, awaiting him in the street. Immediately he appeared Mr. Fitzherbert greeted him in tones which were distinctly above a whisper.

"If that bloke hadn't interfered I'd have put a bullet in you in another half second. I'm not afraid of you, and never shall be; don't you make any mistake—as you'll soon learn! I owe your — girl one, and I owe you one; and I'll pay the two of you; and if there's anyone better at paying those kind of debts he's hard to find. I'll put the police on Mr. Walter Palgrave, and on you, and on your — girl as well; I'll quod the lot of you. Don't you touch me!"

But Mr. Earle did touch him. He caught him off the ground as if he had been a small terrier. Gripping the fellow's right hand, which he had thrust into his jacket pocket, and twisting a revolver from it, Earle threw him from him, to reach the pavement as best he might.

"It is a revolver; I wondered. Cheap Belgian; own brother, I dare bet, to the one which was found on the bank of the lake at Timberham. So it was you who fired at Miss Grahame. I've half a mind to give you into charge for attempted murder."

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"Oh, don't stop at half a mind—go the whole hog ! Give me into charge ! There's a copper at the bottom of the hill—I'll call him, and you give me into charge ! You'll have to come with me to the station, and I lay that when I've told my tale I'll be the only one to leave it—you'll never leave it again. And before very long you'll have your best girl, and your boozing pal, to keep you company. Shall I call the copper—or will you ?"

Apparently Rupert Earle was not anxious that either should call him. Mr. Fitzherbert's strident tones and singular manner were attracting attention. Stragglers were gathering. The proprietor of the coffee shop was standing at his open door. Presently there might be something of the nature of a street row in which Mr. Earle's dignity might suffer more than it had done already. One inferred that he deemed this an occasion on which, taking all the circumstances into consideration, discretion might be the better part of valour. Slipping Mr. Fitzherbert's weapon into his own jacket pocket, he walked calmly off with it ; its owner, instead of attempting to regain possession of his property, contented himself with shouting after him, with a sudden resort to the vernacular.

"So long, my cocky bloke ! How about giving me into charge—that's the time of day, is it ? Think it's better to sling your blooming hook—and right you are—because you won't be able to do it long, and so I tell you straight ! Send my love to your

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best girl, and tell her from me that I haven't gone to America ; that I've blown in all the pieces, and that I'll be even with her inside of four-and-twenty hours. And you may give the same tip to Mr. W. P.—he won't be able to get away from me however much he tries. I'll have all the lot of you dancing on nothing !”

They were not agreeable words for Mr. Earle to have ringing in his ears as he walked home ; possibly he was borne up by the consciousness that it was the speaker's intention that they should not suffer for want of a little colouring. He allowed no signs of annoyance to escape him, but strolled quietly along, with his head a little in the air, the fingers of his right hand trifling with the cheap Belgian revolver which was in his jacket pocket.

When he reached his lodging he found two telegrams awaiting him. This was the first he opened :—

“ Have decided to take up option without further delay. Can you call at my office this afternoon to complete ? Say what time I may expect you.—SILAS P. SHADDOCK.”

A reply-paid form was enclosed. The telegram meant that half a million sterling would be transferred to his account that afternoon. And he had received a hundred thousand pounds only yesterday. It seemed incredible ; yet it was true. And in his secret heart he had known all along that if he could only last it would be true. That he would change the world, in

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all its multitudinous, multifarious relations, much more effectually than it had been changed by the introduction of steam ; that the hour would strike when he could have millions for the asking. As Edwin Harmar had put it, his "Arabian Nights'" dreams had become waking realities. Was ever there a more fortunate man ?

This was the second telegram he opened :—

"Have just discovered that Elsie's going to be married the day after to-morrow to Reverend Peter Menzies. Never was more amazed in my life ! What does it mean ? Can't you stop it ?—CLARE HARMAR."

CHAPTER XXVI

ELSIE'S TELEGRAM

MISS GRAHAME and Mrs. Harmar were together in the morning-room at Timberham. Both ladies seemed to be a trifle heated. Mrs. Harmar was, if anything, the warmer of the two. For one who seemed to be incapable, as a rule, of saying anything which could possibly hurt anybody's feelings her language was surprising.

"I don't care, Elsie, I don't care! Your whole conduct's been disgraceful, monstrous, wicked! I never thought you capable of behaving in such an under-handed way."

"It is amusing to see you assuming airs of virtuous honour at the idea of underhanded proceedings."

"Why do you say that? I never did anything underhanded in my life—never! At least—nothing worth speaking of!"

"I am glad to note the correction. Of course, you know what you think worth speaking of better than I do!"

"Elsie, now you shall tell me what you mean—you shall. For ever so long you've been throwing out hints that I've been guilty of some mysterious, disgraceful crime. What crime do you accuse me of? Tell me—

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straight out!—with no beating about the bush!—at once!"

"With pleasure, since you insist. And as this is probably the last day on which we shall see each other for some time to come, it might be just as well that we should understand each other. All the same, the air with which you carry off the pretence of not understanding already is beyond anything!"

"Elsie, I never dreamed that I could want to shake anyone, especially you; but—no innuendoes, please—out with what you mean!"

Miss Grahame slightly shrugged her shoulders.

"I foresee, from your manner, your whole style, what is the attitude you are going to take up; and as you've taken it up all along, what is the use of talking?"

The young lady moved towards the door. Her cousin got in front of her.

"You shan't leave the room until you've told me—you shan't!"

"As if you needed me to tell you that I know you—how would you like me to put it?—conveyed uncle's will."

"Conveyed?—Elsie! What do you mean?"

"There; I said that would be the attitude you'd take, so what's the good?"

"Elsie, you shan't go!—you shan't! When you speak of uncle's will are you referring to the second one—to the one which can't be found?"

"I'm referring to the one which cannot be found, for

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the sufficient reason that either it's in your keeping or you've destroyed it."

"Are you stark, staring mad? Is it possible that you conceive yourself to have any real grounds for making such an accusation? If so, tell me what they are."

"Do you dare to persist in denying that you took uncle's will out of that envelope?—Oh, don't ask what envelope; I see the question's shaping on your lips—the envelope you found in the library, which, having emptied of its contents, you threw out of the window, and which I showed you the next morning, with 'My Will' in uncle's writing across it."

"I never saw that envelope in my life till you showed it me that morning."

"You deny that you took uncle's will out of it?"

"How could I take anything out of an envelope I had never seen? Do you mean to tell me that you saw uncle's missing will in that envelope?"

"Something was in it; some legal document; seeing what was written outside it I took it for granted that it was uncle's will—and someone took it out."

"You have been harbouring this suspicion all the while? Thank you; nor did I think you capable of such conduct as that. But it throws a vivid light on your whole behaviour; it shows how easily you get a mental twist, and what you can do when you've got one. I suppose it is because you are doing someone an even greater injustice than you did me that you propose

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to become Mr. Menzies' wife under false pretences—isn't that so?"

"Clare, please understand that I decline to allow you to interfere in my affairs."

"My dear, don't try to ride the high horse with me; it's an animal of which you're much too fond. I shall what you call interfere in your affairs so long as there is the remotest chance of my being able to prevent you from being guilty of conduct of which you are so properly and so heartily ashamed."

"What right have you to say that I'm ashamed of what I'm going to do?"

"If you hadn't been ashamed you would not have resorted to such questionable subterfuges to conceal your intentions."

"I merely concealed my intention from you because I knew you'd try to interfere, and I meant to brook no interference."

"I am glad you did me no less than justice, and that you took it for granted that I should take a decent woman's view of your behaviour."

"Clare!—you shall not speak to me like that!"

"As, if you become the Rev. Peter's wife I will never speak to you again, I mean to leave no stone unturned which will save us all from such a calamity, since I am so foolish as to be fond of you."

"You have a peculiar way of showing your fondness!"

"Have you explained to Mr. Menzies what your way is? That you are about to show your fondness

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for him by becoming his wife when you love another man with every fibre of your being?"

"You have no right to say such a thing."

"No right?—to tell the truth? I have no doubt that in your new standard of right and wrong the truth is a monstrous thing. Don't you love Rupert Earle?"

"I'll answer no questions; you, as a woman, oughtn't to ask them."

"I ask them because, as a woman, I understand, as well as you understand, what kind of a future you are proposing for yourself as well as for the man whom you are going to marry under false pretences. Don't you think you might give him a chance to do what, under your guidance, he is about to do, with his eyes at least partially open?"

"I don't want to talk to you, and I won't talk to you—I won't listen! You don't at all understand. Mr. Menzies does understand—he and I understand each other perfectly well, and nothing you can say or do will stop us."

"Perhaps Rupert Earle will be able to stop you."

"Rupert Earle! What do you mean?"

"I've telegraphed to him."

"You haven't dared!"

"Oh, I dare do much more than that, as, if I get the chance, you'll discover."

"When?"

"Yesterday! as soon as I found out what a crime you proposed to commit."

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"What did you say to him ?"

"I told him that I'd just found out that you were going, if you could, to trick Mr. Menzies into marrying a woman who didn't love him, and never would ; and with what unspeakable horror and disgust the discovery had filled me. I asked if he had the dimmest notion what such a falling away from good morals might mean. And I begged him to make use of any means, of any sort or kind, which might offer, to stop you. That, in effect, is what I said to him in my telegram."

"Have you had an answer ?"

"I fancy, my dear, that you will have an answer."

Tyrrell came into the room with a yellow envelope upon a salver.

"A telegram for Miss Grahame."

"There, my dear, in the very nick of time, is the answer you were speaking of."

The girl glanced from the butler to her cousin, and back again, as if she suspected them of conspiring against her. She picked up the envelope as she might have picked up something which she knew conveyed a menace of danger. She tore it open with doubtful fingers. She held the pink slip it contained so that Mrs. Harmar could see that the message consisted of a few words only ; yet the girl stood staring at it as if it had the substance of a lengthy volume. Tyrrell had to recall her to the fact of his continued presence.

"Any answer, miss ? The boy is waiting."

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She glanced up at him as if she were not sure who he was. Then, as if with an effort at recollection, she shook her head.

"No—no answer—none."

Tyrrell left the room. She continued to stare at the few words upon the slip of paper until Mrs. Harmar recalled her to consciousness of her presence.

"Well? Is it an answer? What does he say? Is it from Rupert?"

The girl looked up with a wild look in her eyes which startled Mrs. Harmar.

"It's not from Rupert—I wish it were; oh, how I wish it were."

She went on hurrying feet out of the room; her cousin made no attempt, this time, to stay her. There was something in her words, and tone, and manner, which had affected that lady more than she would have cared to say—disagreeably affected her. Miss Grahame, rushing upstairs to her own chamber, threw herself on her knees beside the bed in what might have been taken as an attitude of prayer. But if in prayer she sought relief apparently none came. Getting on to her feet, straightening out the telegram, which she had crumpled up in her hand, she began again to stare at it as she had done downstairs; as if it had for her a horrible fascination which she was unable to resist. That it conveyed to her a message which was of dire portent was plain; the few written words moved her more than all her cousin's gibes had done—they had transformed her utterly. Presently,

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with feverish fingers, she began to cram on a hat, with a complete disregard of the angle at which she was placing it which was scarcely feminine. Then, with the telegram held tight, she tore from her room, from the house. Mrs. Harmar called to her as she rushed across the hall.

"Elsie ! where are you going ? Who is the telegram from ? I wish you'd tell me, and not behave in such a maddening and mysterious fashion."

There was nothing in Miss Grahame's bearing to show that she even heard. Certainly, if she did, she paid no heed, but passed through the hall door as if some shape of terror were at her heels.

She had not been gone very long when a fly drew up at Timberham. From it alighted Mr. Earle. As she went out to meet him Mrs. Harmar made it plain by her manner that he was a welcome guest.

"Oh, Rupert, why didn't you come an hour ago ? Or, better, why didn't you come yesterday afternoon as you wired you would ?"

"I said I'd come if I could ; and I tried to come, and I couldn't. The little arrangements which surround the payment to a man of half a million sterling are not always to be got through inside half an hour, as I've learned from experience."

"Rupert ! what are you talking about ?"

"Oh, never mind what I'm talking about—where's Elsie ?"

"She's gone out. Did you send her a wire ?"

"I did not ; has she had one ?"

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"She's had one which, so far as I could judge, nearly drove her out of her mind, and quite drove her out of the house. Who can it be from?"

"I shouldn't wonder if it was from that—that understudy for an angel who calls himself Fitzherbert. They've got Palgrave."

"Who's got him?"

"Why, the police; who else do you suppose wants him? That—that devil of a Fitzherbert put them on to him, last night. It looks as if the end of the world were coming for all of us."

"Rupert!"

"I saw Edwin before I left town; you'll have a wire from him presently. He says he'll either come down this afternoon or you'll have to go up to him."

"Why should I go up to him? What do you mean by saying that the end of the world has come for all of us?"

"My dear lady, can't you guess? Don't you know that with Palgrave we sink or swim? Where has Elsie gone?"

"I don't positively know; she didn't tell me; she seemed to be too nearly out of her mind to be able to tell anybody; but I shouldn't be surprised if she's gone to the vicarage to see the man she's going to marry."

"The man she's going to marry! My dear madame, if I get near enough to her before they get me I dare bet a trifle that she'll see in me the man she's

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going to marry." He held out what seemed to be a wad of bank-notes. "There's enough there to take ten ladies, in the greatest comfort, right round the world ; and if I can only get the chance of a flying start, with her, they catch me if they can—until it suits me to be caught. Your husband, Mrs. Harmar, is a man with some of the most remarkable theories I ever struck, and I'm going to do my best to put one of them into good solid practice ; if it comes out as he said it would there's no testimonial he can ask that I won't give him—framed."

CHAPTER XXVII

AT THE VICARAGE

PETER MENZIES was with his sister in the vicarage study. He had open before him on the table what was obviously a legal document, which he was explaining to his sister.

"This, Laura, is the deed of gift by which I transfer to you all my right and interest in the living of Woodcote. As I told you, you are welcome to it now; or, as you say you would prefer to have it then, I will hand it to you to-morrow, after the wedding ceremony, before I start upon my honeymoon."

"That is as I should prefer to have it."

He looked at her with a quizzical smile.

"What's the notion, Laura? Do you think the transaction might savour of simony if completed now?"

"I don't want you to give it me till I am quite sure you won't want it back. For instance, it is conceivable that you might regard your generosity as having been too precipitate if anything happened to prevent your being married to-morrow."

"But—what should happen?"

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"My dear Peter, there are such things as slips between cups and lips."

"You cast a sufficiently cautious eye into the future, Laura."

"I will be frank, I always have been frank with you—"

"You have!"

"And I always will be—I am filled with forebodings."

"Would you mind, Laura, keeping those little matters to yourself—or if you were to impart them to Pattison?"

"There is something about the whole affair which I extremely dislike."

"Suppose I talk to you like this when your turn comes to be married to Pattison?"

"I will take care that my marriage does not in the least resemble what yours promises to be."

"There's only one form of marriage, according to the usages of the Church of England, so far as I'm aware."

"Don't talk nonsense—and don't be ribald. I've been willing, nay anxious, that Elsie Grahame should become your wife—"

"That's very good of you."

"But if my marriage were to be as hers bids fair to be I shouldn't feel that I was properly married."

"My dear Laura, what would you feel? Is it possible that you would feel improperly married?—Laura!"

"To begin with, I cannot imagine how any decent,

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respectable, God-fearing young woman can wish to be married on the sly."

"We are not going to be married on the sly. Elsie's wish is that we should be married in private—it seems to me that nothing could be more sensible."

"Bosh! What do you know about a woman's feelings on such a matter? No girl wants to be married in what you call private except for sound and sufficient reasons of her own, which ought to be exhaustively inquired into by the man she's going to marry."

"Thank you, Laura."

"A woman who looks forward with proper pride and pleasurable anticipation to the state of holy matrimony with the man of her choice, wishes to be married in the face of all the world; she wants to have nothing hole-and-corner about her wedding."

"When your turn comes I should recommend you to have one brass band in the church and another outside; two brass bands playing against each other ought to call a sufficient amount of attention to what is going on."

"There will be no brass band at my wedding, Peter; but all the parish will be there and all my friends and acquaintances; and I will have at least one bridesmaid, if I have to go out into the highways and by-ways to get her."

"I hope you won't have to do that. If your idea of a happy married life is bridesmaids I hope that the church will be as full of them as it can hold. It ought to be a striking sight, your wedding."

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"And no wedding presents ! What Elsie means by refusing to receive wedding presents I cannot imagine. She has actually declined to accept one from Sholto or me."

"Your purses will benefit ; you won't suffer. I've heard that some women get married with the scarcely concealed intention of screwing as many presents out of unwilling givers as they possibly can. There can't be any suspicion of that sort of thing about Elsie."

"That she should have refused to accept a wedding present even from you !—from her future husband !"

"My dear Laura, I assure you that I will make that all right. I propose to present her with a few trifles as soon as we are married, and, among others, with a piece of parchment which will make her the possessor of an income which will cause the mouths of some of the ladies or whom I have just been speaking to water. You can trust me to act, in such matters, as becomes a man who is the husband of his wife."

"Very good. After all, you are chiefly concerned. It is no business of mine."

"I never supposed for a moment that it was ; the misapprehension was on your side."

"But you are my only brother ; and I am your only sister——"

"We are told, Laura, that we ought to be thankful for small mercies."

"As such it is only natural that I should take more than a stranger's interest in your marriage."

"Quite natural ; I do admit it. When your turn comes I'll take at least as much interest in yours."

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"I can only hope and pray that everything will pass off well ; that Elsie will be a good wife to you, and that you will be happy in the married state."

"I'll hope as much for you some day."

"But in the meantime I must positively decline to accept from you anything of the nature of a gift, which you may regret giving me should anything happen to prevent your marriage taking place. After you are married I shall have no fear that you will repent. We did not make ourselves, and, under the circumstances which promise to surround your wedding, until you are safely married I cannot help feeling oppressed by forebodings of the most serious kind. God bless you, Peter ! I trust that the event will prove that I'm a fool."

Miss Menzies went out of the room with her handkerchief held to her eyes. Her brother stared at the door through which she had vanished with looks suggestive of profound amazement.

"To think that Laura should cry !—or even pretend to cry ! I didn't know that there were any tears in her. It would serve her right if I were to alter the deed at the eleventh hour—since she's so pigheaded as to refuse to accept it till it suits her, there'd be time !—and insert Pattison's name instead of hers. That would move her to tears—tears of real rage—if I were to make Pattison the patron of his own living, and her a mere affix in the shape of his wife. Her notion of the clerical relation is that the wife should be the head of her husband."

He began to fidget with the papers which were on

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his table, apparently seeking for something to divert his thoughts—and failing.

"To every man his own marriage; and to every woman hers—isn't that as it ought to be? What Elsie and I want to do is to get married; and that's all. She couldn't have fallen more entirely into a sensible man's notion of what a wedding ought to be than she has done."

Two words of his own soliloquy came back to him—a "man's notion," exactly; the wedding which was to take place to-morrow was a "man's notion" of what such a ceremony ought to be; no fuss and no flummery—and Elsie was a woman. He was quite aware that, in a sense, Laura was right; that to a woman the day of her marriage is the day of her life; her own particular great day. There hardly lived a woman who, about to be joined to the man she loved, would not prefer to proclaim the fact with a flourish of trumpets, and all the fuss and flummery opportunity offered, rather than, as Laura put it, be married on the sly. But was Elsie about to be married to the man she loved? The morrow's bridegroom asked the question of himself a little ruefully. To a man she liked, no doubt—but to the man she loved?

He began to rummage energetically among his papers. What was the use of allowing his mind to dwell upon disturbing thoughts? Bother Laura! Everything would be all right later; he knew perfectly well what he was doing—he would be her husband first, her lover afterwards. Love won love—

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it was a truism. Since she indubitably began by liking him it would fare ill with him if he could not inspire her with a warmer feeling as time went on. When, by degrees, she began to understand how he loved her his love for her would win her love for him. That was how it would be—assuredly that was how it would be. And, in the meanwhile, everything was for the best in this best of all possible worlds. He had resigned his vicarship ; for the moment the Rev. Sholto Pattison was curate-in-charge ; to-morrow, or the day after, he would succeed as vicar. He had rid himself of the irking trammels of his clerical office ; he was a layman, free to do all that a layman would. To-morrow he was to be married, to the woman he loved ; he would pass with her into that wider life of which he had so often dreamed ; hence-forward there would be "roses, roses all the way." How absurd it was, when the sun was so obviously shining, to permit one's thoughts to stay under a cloud. Looked at calmly, candidly, critically, there was nothing which really amounted to even so much as a speck in his sky.

He had just arrived at this—as he endeavoured to flatter himself—entirely satisfactory conclusion, when there came a timid tapping at the outer panel of his door, and, in reply to his invitation to enter, there came into the room his bride of the morrow. So soon as he saw her he knew that he had arrived at that conclusion on what, after all, were imperfect premises.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ELSIE CONFESSES

AFTER his own fashion Peter Menzies was a shrewd and a clear-sighted man. He needed no second glance to tell him that Elsie Grahame came to him as no bearer of glad tidings. She stood in the open doorway, as one who was afraid both to come or to go ; with something forlorn in her aspect and her attitude which moved him to sudden pity.

"Elsie ! Why, what horrible tale has brought that look upon your face ? Come right in ; don't stand there, as if you were afraid of me !"

"I am afraid of you—I am !"

"Elsie—you goose—you, who I've always told myself could be afraid of no one, to pretend to be afraid of me ! That's a pretty jest, upon my word. What have I done to inspire you with such terror that you won't even venture inside my room ?"

He tried to speak lightly, as if wholly unconcerned, but his heart had all at once grown heavy. When, as he advanced to bring her further into the room, she shrank back, as she might have done from some repulsive object, his heart grew heavier still.

"Don't touch me !" she cried. "Don't !"

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Her manner hurt him even more than her words ; it suggested such distaste for his near neighbourhood.

" I'll not touch you ; have no fear. How often am I to tell you that I will do nothing to you, ever, which you would rather I did not do ? But, since you have come so far, you might at least come right into the room, and close the door. Or would you rather that I should first withdraw myself to a more respectful distance ? Will this do ? "

He crossed to where a long French window stood open to the garden. It almost looked as if Elsie had desired his withdrawal ; because so soon as he had taken up his position at what was practically the furthest distance he could get from her, acting on his suggestion, she came right into the room, and shut the door—and, having entered, stood mute, as one who would speak, but could not. He regarded her with the whimsical smile which those who knew him best were aware was the expression which was oftenest on his face when he found himself confronted by one of life's hard places.

" Well, Elsie, is that all you have to say ? What you have to say can't be as serious as you look—it really can't. I'd offer you a chair if I were not afraid that you'd regard such an attention as too great a liberty on the part of one who to-morrow is to be your husband."

" That you will never be—never ! "

Her manner conveyed an uncomfortable impression that the words had been wrung from her by some physical force against which she had struggled in vain.

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If, for a moment, a look of something more than mere pain transfigured his countenance, it was for a moment only. When he asked the question which broke the silence which followed her words his face wore its usual serene expression.

“Is that what you have come to tell me?”

“I’ve—I’ve come to tell you that I—I’m the wickedest woman that ever lived.”

Her words recalled an advertisement he had seen of a drama which bore the alluring title of “The Worst Woman in London.” As if in spite of himself, his smile grew still more whimsical.

“It’s rather a distinction to be in the first flight of anything nowadays. I do assure you that I don’t believe you can be too wicked for me.”

“I’m—I’m a murderer.”

The passage from the general to the particular was uncomfortably sudden. One can call oneself wicked in the most superlative degree, and no one minds ; but when one begins to enter into ugly details the position changes. When Elsie said that, not only did the man’s smile vanish, but a look came on his face which made it seem curiously, because unexpectedly, stern.

“Elsie ! What nonsense are you talking ?”

“I—I killed my uncle.”

“Elsie !”

She was adventuring into regions in which the details were uglier still.

“And they’ve arrested Mr. Palgrave for what I did.”

He did not know if she was in jest or earnest ;

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even if she was in her right mind. Standing there, with her arms dangling at her sides, with her head a little forward, so that she seemed shorter than she really was, she presented a pitiful figure, with her white face and anguished eyes. Recognising that this was a situation in which matters could hardly be made worse by an assertion of his authority, Mr. Menzies came briskly from the window.

"Come, Elsie, this is not like you at all ; you are not yourself ; something has unhinged you. What you want is rest ; sit down, like a dear girl, and tell me all about it."

She drew back from the chair he proffered.

"No, I can't sit down ; not here ; I—am going to the police station ; only—I thought I'd tell you first, so—so that you might understand."

"You are going to the police station ? Why ?"

"Don't I tell you that—I killed my uncle."

"I don't believe it."

"I did !"

The confession was wailed rather than spoken. Then it was as if a spring had burst within her ; so that words rushed from her lips in such haste that they almost tumbled over each other as they came.

"I pretended at first that I hadn't done it ; I tried to hide it even from myself ; I tried to put the blame upon another—oh, what a wretch I was !—then when I found out that someone had seen me do it I knew that my guilt must out. And then I was a greater wretch than ever—I came to you and asked you for

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money to stop that someone's mouth ; and I offered to sell myself to you for five hundred pounds ; and I would have sold myself. I would have gone with you to church to-morrow ; in secret, and ashamed, and at the altar I would have become your perjured wife. But what I should have done then I do not know ! I should never have been to you as your wife —never ! Each time you looked at me and called me wife, and bid me call you husband, I should have thought it was Satan mocking. But of that last crime of pretending to become your wife I shall not be guilty ; perhaps it is to save me from that crime that this has come upon me. An innocent man has been arrested for what I did ; I have the news in a telegram."

She held out the slip of pink paper she had in her right hand.

"Everything seems to have been against him ; nearly everyone believes in his guilt ; if I say nothing he will suffer for my guilt, and I shall have killed twice over. But my second offence will be much greater than my first, because then I knew not what I did. But, this time, I should do it knowing. So you see, Mr. Menzies, why I am going to the police station ; I am going to give myself up to the police."

All at once she had drawn herself up straighter, and was speaking in tones of greater assurance, as if open confession were good for the soul.

"That I have treated you ill, I know ; I could not have treated you worse. I do not know that I have exactly lied to you ; I have at any rate made no

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pretence of affection—you cannot say that I ever said I loved you."

"No ; that you assuredly never did ; but—I did understand that you liked me, Elsie."

"I do ! Don't you see that that makes my shame the greater ?—that, liking you as I did, and do, I should have used you as I have ? Oh, what a mean, contemptible beast I've been !—wherever I should have been strong I have been weakest ! At first it seems so easy to play the coward ; but it becomes more difficult each time it's played ; until, at last, you find that you are suffering, and have suffered, infinitely more than you would have done had you been brave at first. If you could see inside me ; if you could understand what I have suffered, you would know that for my cowardice, my meanness, I have paid dearly. You would forgive, as I hope God will forgive me, since, because—I grant you !—of my own action, I have endured the tortures of hell. For this, at least, you have cause to be thankful, that you have been saved from having such a wife as I should have been to you."

She turned quickly, as if to leave the room ; but Mr. Menzies was quicker ; almost before she had taken a second step he was between her and the door.

"You do not suppose that I will let you go like this ?"

She looked at him as if she did not understand.

"How do you mean—like this ?"

"You cannot seriously imagine that I shall permit you, my plighted wife, my to-morrow's bride, after

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what you have just been saying, to depart as if you had said nothing at all."

"I have said all I wish to say ; all you have a right to hear ; the rest—you will learn from the police."

"Indeed ? I doubt it. My dear Elsie, you're showing one tendency of which I never thought you capable—that's a tendency to be hysterical. Even admitting you're the monster you apparently suppose yourself to be, do be a monster quietly, and don't, under any circumstances, resort to extravagant language—it will be so much more pleasant for all concerned. And surely you have common sense enough to be aware that, after what you have said, and considering the relations which still exist between us, there are questions which I've a right to ask, and which you must answer."

"What questions are they ?"

"To begin with the personal note—one must be excused for letting interest in oneself come first—you said—to use your own phrase, Elsie !—that you were willing to sell yourself to me for a sum of money. You seem to have made the sum a pretty small one. Was that five hundred pounds the sole reason which induced you to promise to be my wife ?"

"It was. I wanted to use the money to stop that man's mouth ; to prevent his handing me over to the police. I had no other way of getting it."

"I am not contesting your statement, but—think, Elsie—you admit that you already liked me. When you promised to be my wife wasn't there present to

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your mind the—I'll put it—remote possibility that one day you might grow to love me?"

"As a wife should love her husband? No—I knew I never could do that."

"Why? Am I a man no woman ever could love like that? Whence this absolute conviction?"

"Shall I tell you?"

"I am in pursuit of information."

"Because I love a single hair of a certain man's head more than I could ever care for the whole of you—body, soul, and spirit."

"That has the ring of truth—down I come with a bump. Why don't you marry this fortunate man? Is it conceivable that he doesn't love you?"

"Oh, he loves me."

"Hasn't he told you so?—or is it only guess-work?"

"Oh, yes, he's told me; and, between whiles, the words in which he told me keep ringing in my ears, morning, noon, and night; and my heart dances every time it hears them."

"Then why, in the name of all that's wonderful, didn't you marry the man?"

"Can't you guess?"

"I can guess that it's some woman's reason which is beyond a plain man's comprehension."

"I wouldn't marry him because I wouldn't bring shame on him."

"What manner of man is he on whom you would have brought shame—by marrying him?"

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"If I had been his wife, and the police had taken me, and I had been hanged—"

"Elsie!—don't!"

"But if I had been hanged, how he would have been shamed by his wife!"

"I begin to get a clearer comprehension of the way of a maid with a man. You would not marry him, lest you shamed him, but—you wouldn't mind bringing shame on me."

"That would have been different."

"I appreciate the difference."

"You wouldn't have cared."

"I shouldn't have cared if they had hanged you? Elsie, do you ever think before you speak? Did you think before you said that?"

"Why do you keep pushing me with questions?—from which I can't get away! Haven't I already confessed that I have treated you like a low, despicable thing? Can't you be content with the general confession and take the details for granted? Do you want me to go down on my knees and confess that way?"

"No, Elsie, I don't want you to go on your knees to me."

"They'll bring me on my knees fast enough, rest assured of that; they'll punish me for my offences, both against God and against you."

"God grant, Elsie, that you are wrong; I believe you are. The only punishment with which I would have you visited is that you should know neither regret nor sorrow during the whole remainder of your

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long life. It's the prayer of one who loves you—as you love that fortunate man. By the way, what happens to be his name?"

"His name is Rupert Earle."

"And you are sure that though I had been your husband twenty years, and done for you all that a husband might, still you wouldn't love me—as a wife should?"

"How can a woman look across twenty years and see clearly what she will be then? I can only see myself as I am now; and, as I am, I know that for me there's one thing in this world, compared to which all the other things, put together, are as dust in the balance—and that is the man I love; and his name is not Peter Menzies; and never will be; but Rupert Earle."

There was the sound of footsteps outside the window; someone came hurrying through it into the room; someone who was not afraid of speaking with what did not seem to be very far from the full force of a strong pair of lungs.

"I've played the listener for the first time in my life, and for perhaps the last. I've been listening outside that window pretty nearly the whole while you two have been talking away in here, and now I feel as if I'd been listening enough—that last observation of the lady's has made me feel as if I could leap out of my skin for joy. It's a silly, and maybe it's a vulgar thing to say; I'm told that love, anyhow, is a middle-class, and therefore a vulgar, kind of passion; but there it is—Elsie, might I trouble you just to come here?"

The speaker was Rupert Earle.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE LADY AND HER LOVER

MR. EARLE stood well inside the window, looking towards Miss Grahame ; his arms stretched out, as if ready to be folded about her when, in obedience to his call, she came. The girl, trembling, taken wholly by surprise, looked this way and that ; as if, the prey of conflicting emotions, in doubt whether to go or to stay, or to obey his summons. Peter Menzies, outwardly the most unmoved of the three, bore himself as a spectator might have done of a drama in whose issue he was interested. Of the strength of Earle's emotion there could be no doubt. Just as Elsie seemed all at once to have grown smaller, he seemed actually to have increased in size ; as if passion had made him bigger. There was, in the confidence of his mien, a suggestion of hypnotic force which affected Elsie with a kind of paralysis. His will seemed to dominate hers to such a degree that, while disinclined to obey him, she lacked the power, not only to defy him, but even of flight. That touch of the berserk, which Edwin Harmar had said was in him, was very much to the front. He spoke to her as a man of the Stone Age—to which that same gentleman had referred—might have addressed a person

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of the opposite sex, whom he desired should become his wife.

"Do you think I'll let you play with me any longer, after what I have heard you say ? "

"You had no right to listen."

"Don't bandy words with me about right—or wrong ! You are mine ; I've heard you own it with your own lips—for me that is enough. If you don't come to me, I'll come to you—Elsie—come."

"I—I don't want to come."

"That's not true, or you'd have looked me in the face when you said it. You turn your eyes away, lest I should see the love flame in them if they met mine ; see how the blood comes and goes in your cheeks, for love of me. Just as my arms are asking to be round you, you are longing to be in them—Elsie—come ! "

Suddenly his voice sank to the softest whisper—that moved her more effectually than his shouting. Her trembling grew ; as if despite herself her eyes met his ; and, as they did, they changed, and she changed with them. She stood straighter ; and, presently, as if drawn by some power she could not resist, began to move across the room, quicker and quicker, until, with a little run, she was in his arms at last.

"Dear heart !" he said. "My love—mine—after all."

The kiss, which had once been interrupted, was begun again ; and this time finished—in the presence of the man who, not many minutes before, had supposed that this woman would, on the morrow,

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be his wife. He gave no outward sign ; he had remained motionless since Earle's advent on the scene ; he still stayed motionless ; yet he could hardly have been unconscious of the fact that he was being cast for an undesirable part in a comedy for which he had no liking.

It was Miss Grahame who spoke next, as she strove to disengage herself from a gentleman's arms.

"Loose me—I'm not going—you needn't be afraid."

"I'm not afraid—you'll never go again."

"Shan't I? Don't be too sure."

Neither party seemed to notice the presence of the master of the house, who within so short a space of time had occupied so delicate a position as regards the lady. Still less, seemingly, did they deem it necessary to ask him to excuse them for anything which might strike him as being singular in their proceedings. Miss Grahame continued ; with, in her air and her language, that flavour of extravagance on which Mr. Menzies had already commented.

"You say you have been listening outside—to what have you listened? Did you hear what kind of a creature I really am?"

"I heard some rhodomontade."

Mr. Earle's tone was, all at once, as dry as previously it had been the reverse.

"Is that what you call it? Is that really your point of view? You remember that I told you that I would only become your wife to save you from the gallows?"

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"That, also, was rhodomontade."

"Was it? I wished to make you think that I thought you guilty in order to conceal from you the fact that I was."

"An excellent device."

"Is that truly your opinion? You don't consider that I behaved like a contemptible wretch?"

"Lady, were you the most contemptible of all the contemptible wretches that ever adorned this earth, how would that benefit me—since you are mine?"

"Not for long. You are just in time to accompany me to Branxham police-station, and to see me give myself up to Inspector Felkin."

"Oh, no, I'm not."

"If that means that you won't come with me, then I must go alone."

"You'll not do that."

"But I shall."

"And I say you won't."

"Rupert!"

"Elsie!"

"I—I killed my uncle."

"There's a cardinal rule which applies to all such occasions as this—that when a man and woman find themselves in the fix we are, each party should wipe the slate. Consider it wiped—we're starting with a clean one. What you're going to do is to come with me for a run round the world. I've a marriage licence in my pocket—oh, I came provided—and there's a

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church handy ; we can get the business through in half an hour, and by to-night we shall be as far from this place as steamers and trains can get us—on the first stage in our journey about the globe."

"If, Rupert, you really mean what you say——"

"You may take it, absolutely, that I do."

"Then you don't love me."

"That seems crooked reasoning. But I'm not going to reason. You've got to come."

"I'll not come."

"You will, because I'll make you."

"You may try to make me, but you'll fail."

"Not much I shan't ; because, if need be, I'll pick you up in my arms and carry you."

Slipping from his arms, even as she was speaking, she ran across the room, so that she interposed Peter Menzies between herself and her lover.

"Mr. Menzies, I call on you to protect me from Mr. Earle."

For the first time during the progress of that curious scene Peter Menzies spoke, with a dryness which suggested that he at least appreciated the whimsicality of his position.

"I'll protect you, if it is necessary ; but I doubt if it will be."

Rupert Earle looked what he probably felt, non-plussed. He glared at her.

"This is a point at which I don't see how the methods of the Stone Age quite come in. Ought I to club you, and, throwing you across my shoulder,

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proceed to carry you off? How dare you take me by surprise like that? Come here!"

"I will not; and I am sure Mr. Menzies will keep you from compelling me against my will. Listen to me."

"It seems I've got to."

"There's nothing in the world I desire so much as to be your wife."

"Then, if that's so, why don't you take the chance now you've got it?"

"You heard so much outside the window; but I think you must have heard something else as well. Rupert, I wish you better than you wish yourself; I wish you so well that, if I can help it—and you'll find I can—you shall not have for a wife such as I am."

"You'll find I shall. In the Stone Age men didn't consult the wishes of the lady; they consulted their own. The women they pre-empted were theirs. I've pre-empted you; and I'm game to hold you against all claimants—even against Inspector Felkin."

"I am sorry to hear you talk like that. It is now you who use extravagant language, not I. I'm going to Branxham."

"Elsie, don't you make any mistake. When you leave this room I go with you. I'm the man to whom you belong; as you're a piece of property on which I set some store, I'm not going to let you go from my sight. If you won't listen to the voice of reason, and of love, that's shouting inside you all the

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time, I shall have to resort to the methods of the primitive man, and stick at nothing. You are not going to Branxham ; you are going with me."

" You are too utterly absurd—are you actually threatening me with personal violence ? "

" I am not threatening at all. When Brown tells Jones that if he does not look out where he's going he'll fall into a ditch, he's not threatening Jones—he's giving him a friendly warning. I'm warning you. You come back to me here, it's your natural place."

" I'm not coming. Do you know that the police have arrested Walter Palgrave ? "

" I say to you, you come here."

" And I tell you again, I'm not coming. Is it possible that you—who pretend to care for me—want me to keep on playing the coward ; to run away ; to let an innocent man suffer for my crime ? "

" I say to you, still once again, come here."

" And if I won't come ?—and I won't."

Rupert Earle, intent on the methods of the Stone Age, made a sudden movement in the direction of the—judged by the Stone Age standards—refractory maiden. Mr. Menzies interposed.

" Stay—just one instant ! I fancy there's someone playing the part you played—of a listener outside the window."

A head was thrust, with dramatic suddenness, round the side of the open window, and a face looked into the room.

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" You're right—you've good ears, whoever you are
—the listener's me ! "

For a second or two the three persons within the room stared, in silence, at the face at the window. Then Rupert Earle broke into a shout of recognition.

" By all that's wonderful—it's the man for whom the lady's wishing to act as a substitute ; the man himself—it's Walter Palgrave ! "

CHAPTER XXX

THE WHOLE STORY

THE head and face being joined by a body, Walter Palgrave stepped briskly into the room.

"It's a surprising fact, that is my name, and there's been many a time I've wished it wasn't. And by all that's still more wonderful, it's Rupert Earle ! Have you been projected from the skies ? The sight of you makes me wonder if my luck is turning. And—Miss Grahame ! I entreat your forgiveness for what must seem the eccentricity of my costume, but—I came away in a hurry. You'll hardly believe it, but there are occasions on which you haven't even time to change your clothes. And you, sir, I beg pardon for my uninvited intrusion—I am sure you are the gentleman with such excellent ears !—pray accept my assurance that there are moments when, if you see a window, you must go through it, and your one fear is that some intrusive scoundrel will come in after you."

"Palgrave, the sight of you here is one of the best sights I've seen. Confound it, man, I thought the police had got you."

"My dear chap, so they had—nearly ; quite—for a time ; it's owing to my presence of mind that the

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time wasn't longer. It's one of the most amusing stories you've heard for many a day—with thrilling moments ! I wish I'd time to tell it. It would entertain Miss Grahame—and you, sir, if you're a student of life's queer by-ways. But the fact is, the police have nearly got me now ; they're so close at my heels that if they were closer they'd be all over me. Have you any spare cash about you ? I'm broke to the wide ! And a decent suit of clothes ? A man can't go careering round the country in this attire, and with empty pockets, without subjecting himself to the most serious inconvenience—especially if the hue-and-cry is hot against him."

"I can let you have cash—any amount ; but as for clothes—Mr. Menzies, can't you let Mr. Palgrave have a suit of clothes ?"

"If he does not object to a clerical cut."

"Object to a clerical cut !—my dear sir, it's the very thing ! If you can only rig me out as a bishop I'll bless you for the whole brief remainder of my life—attired as a spiritual lord I'd walk right past their noses, and they wouldn't dare to touch me. Only—you'll forgive my observing that it's a case of sharp's the word ; it'll have to be a bishop at once, or never. Who the devil's that ?"

Mr. Palgrave was moving towards the door, and, with his hand on Mr. Menzies' sleeve, was inducing that gentleman to move with him, with an evident eye to the speedy induction of himself into one of the other's suits of clothes, when just as he reached

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it the handle was turned on the other side, and he had scarcely time to move to one side, when the door was opened, almost in his face, to admit a lady.

"Mrs. Harmar!" he cried.

The newcomer was indeed that lady, who exclaimed, at sight of him, in her turn:

"Walter Palgrave!"

"Do you know that if you had opened that door one half second sooner you might have knocked me over?"

"I—I'm very sorry."

"I'll forgive you—if you'll forgive me for rushing away."

"They're after you!"

"I know they are."

"That's why I made such haste." Haste, indeed, seemed to have made the lady short of breath. "I wondered if you were here."

"I am; I'm beginning to wish I wasn't."

"They're coming down the lane—in a trap."

"After all, it's beginning to look as if I'm trapped. Don't you hear, sir, that they're coming down the lane in a trap?—haste is the essence of the situation —how about that suit of clothes?"

"If you'll come with me at once it oughtn't to take you very long to get into a suit of my clothes."

"It won't—if you'll only produce one for me to get into; and they'll only give me law enough. Some-

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one else is coming to this room. Is it them this time?"

It was not; that time it was Miss Menzies, who was in a state of agitation which was not rendered less by the discovery that her brother's study was full of persons who, quite obviously, were as agitated as she herself was.

"Peter! What is the meaning of these proceedings? What are all these people doing here? Elsie!—and Mrs. Harmar! And there are two gentlemen! Peter, I insist upon your explaining to me what all this means."

"Laura, if you will be so good as to let me pass, with this gentleman, I'll explain everything to you afterwards."

"You'll explain everything to me afterwards! But I insist upon your explaining everything to me now! There are four dreadful-looking men at the front door, and I believe there are some more at the gate; such dreadful-looking men that I positively banged the door in their faces and put up the chain; and when they heard me doing that I believe they had the impertinence to come round to the back."

"You are quite right, Miss Menzies, though why you call me a dreadful-looking man I am not quite clear; I was not aware till I just now heard you say so that I was such a forbidding specimen of humanity. Kindly stay exactly as you are, with the door shut, and your back against it. Mr. Walter Palgrave, you are my prisoner. You've given us a good run, so

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don't you try to take to earth, because the game is up."

"Pray, sir, who the deuce are you ?"

"I am Inspector Felkin, and I arrest you on a charge of wilful murder. I have the warrant in my pocket."

"I don't quite like your hand upon my shoulder."

"I'm afraid you'll have a good many hands on both your shoulders before you've finished."

"Shall I ?"

"Now, no nonsense !"

"I think I recognise my friend over there."

"Yes ; and I recognise you. You managed to give me the slip last night ; you and that young woman of yours managed it between you. But I lay you don't do it again."

The local policeman, George Wilkins, looking loutish enough in his badly-fitting plain clothes, came stamping across the room with a pair of handcuffs in his hand.

"Don't you touch me with those."

"Not touch you with them ? Why, I'm going to put 'em on."

"Take my tip, and don't you try."

The inspector interposed.

"Now, Mr. Palgrave, don't you be foolish. Don't let's have any trouble here, in Mr. Menzies' house, among your friends. You've done us once ; we're not going to give you a chance to do us again—we're going to have those handcuffs on you. Hold out your hands."

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"I'm damned if I do!"

Just as a scrimmage seemed impending Miss Grahame, taking all parties concerned unawares, thrust herself between Mr. Wilkins and the prisoner.

"George Wilkins, Mr. Palgrave is quite right in refusing to allow you to put the handcuffs on him. He is innocent; in my presence you shan't treat him as if he were guilty. If you must put them on someone put them on my wrists. I'll hold out my hands; handcuff me."

She did as she said. Standing very upright, she held her arms out straight in front of her, with her hands close together. But Mr. Wilkins showed no inclination to take her at her word, while the inspector treated what he evidently regarded as her untimely intervention with undisguised disapprobation.

"Now, Miss Grahame, what foolishness is this? What good do you suppose you'll do Mr. Palgrave by making a scene? We're going to have the handcuffs on him if he likes it or not; and the best service you can do him is to recommend him to accept the inevitable, to behave like a man, and to give no trouble—and if he does it'll be he who'll suffer; no one else will."

But the girl did not budge.

"I am only endeavouring, Mr. Felkin, to save you from committing a very serious blunder, since it was I who killed my uncle, not Mr. Palgrave."

"Elsie!" cried Rupert Earle.

He made a step forward; then stopped, as if

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conscious that the moment for interference by him had not come yet. There was a general movement in the room. Mrs. Harmar drew closer to her, Miss Menzies farther away, leaving the inspector to occupy her place, with his back against the door. A fresh figure came into the room, as the others had done, by way of the window ; only they had entered in boldly, as men who had pressing business, and he sneaked in furtively, as one who was by no means sure that he had any business to be there at all.

"Miss Grahame," demanded the inspector, "what nonsense is it you are talking ?"

"I was not aware that it was nonsense to confess to having committed murder."

He stared at her with the eyes of puzzled authority.

"Is it possible that you can realise the gravity of what it is you are saying ?"

"I realise only too well. That—that doesn't prevent my having to say it. I ought to have said it before now—now I must."

The girl's firmness was gone ; she was plainly trembling. But instead of showing any signs of sympathy, the officer eyed her sternly, as if he were all bristling with suspicion.

"Miss Grahame, don't you delude yourself with the idea that play-acting will save Mr. Palgrave, because it won't. The only difference will be that you will have to come with him to the station."

"I cannot stop your arresting half-a-dozen people

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if you choose, Mr. Felkin, although I alone am guilty. There is a person present in the room who will give you all the satisfaction on that point you can possibly desire."

"Who is it ?

"I saw him come into the room—there he is, behind Mr. Earle."

Rupert Earle swung round, to find that Mr. Lionel Fitzherbert was apparently endeavouring to use his broad back as a screen.

"You beauty!" he exclaimed, in a tone which suggested that he meant very much the reverse of what he said. "So it's a case of here you are again—that's how you earned your blood money, is it?"

It was possibly Mr. Fitzherbert's wish to assume a tone of injured virtue ; if so, the assumption was a bad one.

"Mr. Earle, you're treating me unjustly ; you did it before, and you're doing it again ; all I ask, all I've always asked, is that I should have fair play. Mr. Felkin knows perfectly well who I am."

The inspector immediately proceeded to give him a testimonial, which was scarcely of the sort which one would have expected from the confident fashion in which Mr. Fitzherbert had appealed to him.

"I know that you're a brother of Alfred Tyrrell, who's butler at Timberham ; and that he tries to conceal your existence as much as he can, since you're a kind of brother of whom he has every cause to be ashamed ; since you're a born loafer—I doubt if you

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ever did a stroke of honest work in your life ; a habitual blackguard, and a professional thief. What do you know about what Miss Grahame says ?"

" You are not very hearty in the way you speak to me, are you, Mr. Felkin ? I'm surprised ; I really am. I know what the young lady says I know."

" Do you mean to tell me that you know that she killed John Culver ? "

" Certainly I know it. With her own hand—with the help of the corner of a heavy cash-box."

" How do you know she did it ? You saw Miss Grahame kill John Culver ? "

" Certainly I saw her—with my own eyes I saw her."

" That's a lie ! "

Yet another person had made an unceremonious use of the open window to gain admission to the vicarage study. The latest comer was Tyrrell, the Timberham manservant. It was he who had applied such an unparliamentary epithet to Mr. Fitzherbert's assertion. At the sound of his voice that person, wincing as if he had been struck a blow, turned to glare at him as if he were the last person he wished to see. He tried to bluster.

" How dare you say I tell a lie ?—how dare you ? What do you mean by coming here anyhow, and interfering in what's no concern of yours ? You mind your own business ! "

The inspector spoke.

" I need scarcely tell you, Tyrrell, that I don't

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require your assurance to cause me to doubt any statement which comes from that quarter."

Mr. Fitzherbert cut the inspector short. "Here! let me get out of this! It's no use for me to speak; I'm a fool ever to open my mouth—I'm treated the same way every time I do. I'll leave you to fight this out among yourselves. I'm off, I am; I'm not going to stop here to be treated as if I was dirt."

Mr. Earle, seizing the indignant little gentleman by the shoulder, held him as if in a vice.

"You're going to stay here to be treated exactly as you deserve."

"You let me go; you'd better!"

"I think I'd better not. Our friend is quite safe in my charge, Mr. Felkin, for the present. What was that you were saying?"

"I was about to ask you, Mr. Tyrrell, on what grounds your contradiction was based."

"I'll tell you the whole story, as I know it only too well; I ought to have told it long ago, only—it wasn't easy."

"That I can believe; only, if it's going to clear the air, which seems to be rather in want of a clearance, for goodness' sake let's have what you call the whole story now."

"On the morning of the day on which Mr. Culver was murdered, Sam here came out of gaol."

"So you're Sam, are you? That's a come down from Lionel."

This was Rupert Earle.

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"Oh, I'll Sam him!—and you too!"

This was Mr. Fitzherbert, who seemed to object to the persistent fashion in which Mr. Earle maintained his grip. Tyrrell went on.

"I chanced to hear that he intended to celebrate his release from gaol by committing a burglary at Timberham."

"That's a nice thing for a brother to say!—so help me! Who told you that?"

"Fortunately you're not my brother; you're my step-brother, which is bad enough. One of your prison acquaintances gave me a hint, on which I acted. You will understand that this was not a case in which I could give notice to the police; I preferred to act as my own policeman. I made arrangements to receive him."

"You did, did you? I wish I'd known!"

"But all my calculations were upset by the fact that that night was marked by a series of unlooked-for occurrences. I do not wish to enter into private matters, which are no concern of mine——"

"What are you doing all the while?"

"But some gentlemen who, I suppose, had had differences of opinion with Mr. Culver, took steps that night to regain possession of what they regarded as their own property."

"There's an elegant way of putting it!—my word!"

"Miss Grahame, who, I fancy, had her doubts of what was taking place, and who had been roused by

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the noise, came down to see what had happened. Almost as soon as she had entered she was followed by Mr. Culver, who seeing her there, and the state of the room, jumped to the conclusion that it was she who was responsible for what had been done. In her anxiety, I suppose, to avoid a scene at that time of night, she tried to leave the room. In his attempts to stop her—he was an old man and not very sure of his movements—he tripped over a chair."

"Did I—did I strike him?"

It was Elsie who asked the question.

The reply, which was spoken as by one who was sure of what he said, came instantly.

"You did not."

"You are sure?"

"I am certain that you did not touch him."

"Thank God! I thought I didn't; I felt sure I didn't; I knew I didn't; only—he said he saw me."

"So I did, with my own eyes."

"What he says is false. He has his own reasons for saying it, as I will presently show you. Mr. Culver was so long before he moved that I thought he must have hurt himself in falling."

"You seemed to have kept your eyes well skinned. All the time, where were you?"

"I was in the library itself, waiting for you."

"You were? And never gave a sign? You old fox! If I'd only got on your scent!"

"I was just going to see what was the matter with Mr. Culver, when—you came through the window.

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When you found that someone had been there before you, you stood looking about you, as if you were wondering what had happened."

"So I was ; what cove wouldn't have wondered ? Wondered !—fancy coming all that way to crack a crib and then finding it had been cracked already ! My word ! if that wasn't enough to make you sick !"

"You picked up a steel cash-box from the carpet. As you did so, as if your entrance had roused him, Mr. Culver half raised himself from the floor, and, at the sight of you, exclaimed, 'Who are you ?' You turned and saw him. You did not answer him, but struck him with the cash-box on the head. I believe you killed him on the instant ; he was only an old man, and did not want much killing—he fell back on to the floor, and did not move again. When you realised what it was that you had done, you were seized with terror, and fled. I was so—so confounded, so stunned by what I had seen, it had all come so suddenly, that I cannot correctly be said to have known what I was doing. I lost my head. I let you go ; I did not try to stop you ; I did not dare to rouse the house for fear of what would happen to you. I left Mr. Culver lying dead, and I went to my room. And from that hour to this I have not breathed a syllable of what I saw to anyone."

"And now that you've breathed a word, what next ? We all know how a story like that can be hashed up—who do you think's going to believe it ?"

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"Unfortunately I have proofs in my possession which will establish the truth of what I have said, as you are aware."

"So it was you who played that trick on me, was it ?"

"It was. Since that night I have only seen you once. You remember, Miss Grahame, that envelope which you missed from the library at Timberham ?'

"Perfectly."

"It was my step-brother who took it. I think you had been talking to him that afternoon in the woods."

"If that is your step-brother, I had ; or, rather, he had been thrusting his conversation upon me."

"He followed you to the house. I imagine he saw where you put the envelope. The first chance he had he nipped through the window and stole it. He took the paper which it contained out of it ; the envelope he threw away. I shouldn't be surprised if he has that paper on him now."

"What a lot you do know ; you must see double, because it so happens that I have. It's never left me since, and here it is." Taking a paper from some secret receptacle he waved it above his head. "So far as I can make out it's the old bloke's missing will—it ought to have been worth thousands to me ; and so it would have been if I had had any luck. But who's going to have luck with a spoil-sport about like you ? Oh, I killed the old gentleman ; I make you a present of the information ; he gave me such a start that I did it before I knew what I had done. You saw me kill

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him—did you? Very well; now you'll see me kill you."

Wriggling himself loose before Mr. Earle suspected his intention, he made a dart across the room.

"Look out!" cried Earle. "He's got a revolver in his hand—he's full of them!"

The little man did seem to have a knack of keeping one about his person. But Rupert Earle was as quick as he was. He caught him by the wrist, and the revolver went off. His wrist must have been twisted; at the moment of discharge the muzzle must have been pointed directly at his own head, because the bullet entered his brain, and, before them all, he fell dead; destroyed by the weapon which he had meant to use against another. . . . And that was the whole of the story.

Elsie Grahame did go round the world with Rupert Earle; and, together, they are still going round it. The fame of the Earle engine is in all men's mouths; it has given new power to the earth. Walter Palgrave is one of his managing men. He took the lesson he had been taught to heart; as regards abstinence and steadiness, he is a model to his fellows. Sallie Scarlett, who has left the halls, is his wife. Elsie Grahame executed a deed by which she assigned all that her uncle had left her to Edwin and Clare Harmar, neither of them objecting. Laura Menzies is Mrs. Sholto Pattison; her husband is

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vicar of Woodcote—presented by his wife. Her brother gave her the patronage of the living, although his wedding did not come off. Indeed, Peter Menzies is still unmarried. He has seen a good deal of that side of life which he wanted to see—it would almost seem as if he had seen too much. He recently informed his sister—who finds her husband almost as much of a trial as he finds her—that he was inclined to the opinion that the highest form of happiness was represented by a cloistered monk.

THE END

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New Fiction

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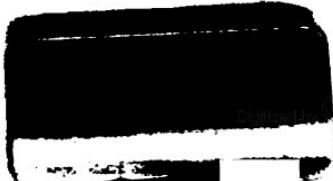
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